

# THE ROLE OF RAIL IN HIGHWAY REVOLTS

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## Humanities and Arts Course Sequence:

<i>Course Number</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Term Completed</i>
EN 1000	English Elective	T
HI 2900	Topics in Gender and History	A22
HI 1311	Introduction To American Urban History	B22
HI 3317	Topics In Environmental History	D23
AR 2740	3d Environmental Modeling	A23
HU 3900	Riots and Rebellion in American Cities	D24

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**Abstract:**

This Humanities & Arts Requirement included a sequence of depth courses in American and queer history and a breath field in 3d environmental modeling. The Requirement concluded with a seminar exploring riots and rebellions in American cities. The work for this seminar included a research paper exploring the significance of rail in shaping highway revolt dynamics and protest methods in Boston and Atlanta. The paper links Atlanta's desegregation of urban amenities and emerging subway system to later opposition groups that formed in response to Atlanta's Interstate 485 and Boston's Inner Belt and Southwest Corridor. It concludes by proposing that the fight for equitable urban mobility encourages a set of collaborative protest methods that have proven effective in combating urban highways.

# The Role of Rail in Highway Revolts

*Sam Randa*

United States urban renewal policies between the 1940s and 1970s not only massively reshaped urban geography, but fundamentally changed how people move throughout cities and undermined a half century of busses, subways, and streetcars in favor of motor vehicles. This sudden shift of priorities gouged paths through historical urban fabric, displaced primarily disadvantaged communities, and gave rise to freeway riots that quickly spread throughout the United States. Investigating Atlanta's Interstate 485 along with Boston's Inner Belt and Southwest Corridor reveals a deep connection between antihighway activism and the precedent or promise of mass transit. Rail's unmistakable presence before and during freeway revolts primed urban residents to understand transit as a potentially segregative device and encouraged collaborative, community-wide, effective protest methods, ultimately facilitating a multi-modal perspective of urban mobility.

Literature surrounding highway revolts is widespread and well-developed. Holistic analysis is common, examining not only organized resistance but the ways race and class influenced less visible forms of protest.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, many resources focus on individual highway projects or instances of transit protest, often as parts of city-wide narratives surrounding urban rebellion. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's involvement in and against Boston's Inner Belt has been extensively documented,<sup>2</sup> as well as Boston's highway revolts more generally.<sup>3</sup> In Atlanta, the segregation of the city's transit system influenced a network of activism in its South Side,<sup>4</sup> and civil rights era activism led to the desegregation of public services, including streetcars and buses.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City*, A Quadrant Book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Moss, Yinan Zhang, and Andy Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt: MIT, Highways, and Housing in Cambridge, Massachusetts," *Journal of Urban History* 40, no. 6 (November 2014): 1054–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144214536870>.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Vrabel, *A People's History of the New Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, 3. print., 1. paperback print, *Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J. Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

Few pieces of literature comprehensively bridge the gap between rail advocacy and those fighting against highways. Although many pieces recognize that highway protest methods draw from a diverse set of socioeconomic realities, the transit methods that exist within a city can play a similarly prominent role. Rail heavily influenced Boston's activist planning rhetoric as an equitable alternative to motor transit and provided attractive options for highway routing for the Inner Belt and Southwest Corridor.<sup>6</sup> But, its connection to the city's concurrent and succeeding highway revolts are not distinctly identified and generalized. Not only do rail projects shift the dynamics of highway revolts towards rail as an alternative, they generate protest methods that can then be utilized as a general instrument, proving effective against highways. Exploring this influence provides a richer understanding of how patterns of urban mobility protest manifest across cities with similar transit histories.

Considering rail networks—and multimodal transit broadly—as a significant factor in the process of highway revolts allows us to understand not only what effective highway protest looks like, but where those methods of protest originate. Many effective, collaborative protest methods link back to the progressive era and the Black fight to desegregate urban amenities, finding their way into transit equity protests in the following decades. This allows transit activists to recognize the situations in which competitive protest methods appear and how to resist them, diverting their efforts towards advocating for the overall health of their communities as opposed to preserving the comfort of their neighborhoods over the suffering of others.

Furthermore, comparative analysis can provide a blueprint for taking advantage of each city's transit history to progress towards equitable mobility for residents. Effective highway resistance sometimes manifests in odd ways; for example, Boston's density of academic institutions make them an influential player in determining highway routing. So, keeping distinct, local pieces of historical context in mind can help shape protests that best account for each city's goals and dynamics. Similarly, multi-neighborhood coalitions may be more difficult to obtain due to regional identity within cities. While

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<sup>6</sup> Karilyn Crockett, *People before Highways: Boston Activists, Urban Planners, and a New Movement for City Making* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018); Moss, Zhang, and Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt."

Atlanta had a relatively easy time organizing in multiple parts of the city simultaneously, Boston neighborhoods have a more independent identity, forming localized activist groups. Finally, environmental strategies that prioritize the judicial system may be less effective when demolishing existing highways as opposed to the cancellation of possible projects explored in this article. Identifying cities that share specific historical characteristics and tracing those similarities through successful highway revolts can improve the likelihood that protest efforts are directed towards areas that have proven historically effective.

Following early urban renewal development patterns, Georgia took an early, aggressive approach to construct its highway system, completing what became two major projects by the early 1960s. The origins of Atlanta's highway system started with the Atlanta Expressway, first introduced by the Georgia State Highway Department in 1946. The plan consisted of six radial routes joined by a downtown connector, including an east/west downtown route, as well as a major vertical route through midtown.<sup>7</sup> Even at this time—multiple years before the Housing Act of 1949 which kicked off the urban renewal era—urban planners and road developers created plans with slum clearance in mind. Many of the radial routes were intentionally paved through “marginal neighborhoods,” targeting poor Black Atlanta residents. Construction of the project began in 1948, but budget concerns and the area's explosive growth resulted in only 18 miles of finished road by 1958. However, the passing of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 relieved most of the project's funding pressure and greatly accelerated construction in the following decade, with the system opening fully in September 1964.<sup>8</sup> Despite this highway network not initially being planned with the interstate highway system in mind, the built highway eventually reflected its standards, followed by the renaming of the east/west and north/south routes into I-20 and I-75/I-85 respectively and their integration into the federal interstate highway system.

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<sup>7</sup> H. W. Lochner & Company and De Leuw, Cather & Company, “Highway and Transportation Plan for Atlanta, Georgia” (Georgia Institute of Technology, 1946), <http://hdl.handle.net/1853/36611>.

<sup>8</sup> Lichtenstein Consulting Engineers, “Historic Context of the Interstate Highway System in Georgia” (Georgia Department of Transportation Office of Environment/Location, March 2007), <https://www.dot.ga.gov/AboutGeorgia/CentennialHome/Documents/Historical%20Documents/HistoricalContextof%20GeorgiaInterstates.pdf>.

In addition to the physical division caused by highway projects, Atlanta's segregation defined a parallel history of injustice regarding unequal distribution of public services. Stemming from Black advocacy groups in Atlanta's South Side, the city built a large network of activists demanding equitable access to urban services in the early 20th century, forming the backbone for organized highway opposition. In the 1950s, the fight for the desegregation of urban amenities and public spaces largely worked within legally acceptable frameworks of protest to great success. Following the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and its resulting Supreme Court case declaring public bus segregation unconstitutional, the NAACP planned a minimally-invasive protest aimed at

generating a similar disobedience case which could then be fought in court. Crucially, focusing on the singular goal of generating a court case limited the scope of disobedience significantly; NAACP leaders discouraged public involvement, forbid protesters from sitting next to whites to prevent inciting acts of aggression, and maintained an amiable verbal tone. When this strategy proved successful, Black advocacy groups shifted focus to golf courses, pools, and parks, whose paths to desegregation followed similar trajectories.<sup>10</sup> Through organizations like the All Citizens Registration Committee, civil rights leaders took advantage of white Atlanta's willingness to abandon public spaces, avoiding the prolonged periods of prolonged racial conflict typically common of newly-desegregated amenities. This incredibly



*Figure 1: The 1947 Lochner plan for the metro-Atlanta expressway system showing radial freeways and downtown connector.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> H. W. Lochner & Company and De Leuw, Cather & Company, "Highway and Transportation Plan for Atlanta, Georgia."

<sup>10</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*.

organized, intentional form of protest heavily used by Black activists signaled the importance of collaborative activism within urban space.

But, this period of desegregation success in the late 1950s and early 1960s did not prevent the lack of social safety nets for Black residents and the selective defunding of primarily Black public spaces. The progressive era did not lead to many amenity improvements, with Black neighborhoods lacking proximity to parks and transit connectivity, and thus required a different approach to protest. Recognizing the limitations of progressive-era activism, the South Atlanta Project, run by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), sought to pressure the city government into repairing manifestations of community neglect such as unpaved or pothole-ridden streets, dangerous corridors lacking adequate pedestrian crossings, and underfunded school districts. To do this, they encouraged cross-neighborhood sit-ins, picketing, rent strikes, and boycotts specifically targeted towards urban reformation. Despite similar protest methods appearing in the 1956 Sugar Bowl riots and sit-ins across the city, community mobilization did not significantly touch upon neighborhood neglect until the mid 1960s. To supplement these protest methods, the SNCC made temporary improvements through self-help, utilizing money raised by neighborhood residents through donations and bake sales. These funds were then directed into various projects such as neighborhood cleanups, health clinics, and housing assistance. In 1966, the SNCC's visibility caused Atlanta mayor Ivan Allen Jr. to begin seriously taking notice of neighborhood neglect. This led to a promising but short-lived shift in urban renewal policies towards supporting and preserving low-income Black communities.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, the array of protest methods utilized in support of equitable urban mobility within Atlanta had begun to show promise.

Part of this brief shift towards equitable transit during the Allen administration involved a new mass transit system in the city, hoping to prove Atlanta's image as a modern, desirable business hub. During this time, mayor Allen coined his vision for Atlanta's future: "the city too busy to hate." But, access to the emerging Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) subway system proved inherently unequal, resulting in another wave of Black-led calls for reconsideration. In the hope of

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<sup>11</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*.

positioning Atlanta as a city invested in public infrastructure, to-be-mayor Allen introduced the Six Point Program in 1960 as part of his election campaign, proposing additions to the city's highway system by advocating for the construction of a civil auditorium and expansion of infrastructure PR programs.<sup>12</sup> The creation of a new light rail transit network formed one of these points, launching a 18-month study into its technology and layout.<sup>13</sup> The study placed Atlanta's white central business district as the core of the city's development, representing 20 percent of its tax revenue and 25 percent of its employment. This focus on the city's business district marked the first of many design aspects and motivations that casted aside Black communities.

Despite laying the groundwork for an efficient alternative to motor transit, MARTA was plagued by unequal connectivity driven by a plan that explicitly catered to the largely white business class. By placing focus on the city's downtown center, MARTA prioritized transit for the high-income, mostly white Atlanta residents traveling to and within this district, being explicitly aimed at "the businessman, the taxpayer, the bus driver, the housewife, and the government official."<sup>14</sup> As a result, the proposed routes for the rail network often ignored Black and low income citizens who do not make up the city's elite. The city planned six radial lines following existing railway corridors which carefully traveled around historically Black neighborhoods, providing little access and reinforcing racial boundaries. Two out of the three lines that served Black residents did so out of necessity, passing through neighborhoods towards white destinations such as the municipal airport, commonly used by business travelers, and the Avondale Estates, a wealthy white community. Only one line, the west line, explicitly served African American areas. Recognizing the likelihood of significant backlash, the state government drafted a constitutional amendment that would only require passing votes from the six core counties served by the line, ignoring those not served by the current routes.<sup>15</sup> By doing so, the city laid the groundwork for a

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<sup>12</sup> Ichiro Miyata, "'Setting Atlanta in Motion': The Making and Unmaking of Atlanta's 'Public' Transit, 1952-1981," *University of Georgia*, 2010, <https://exploro.libs.uga.edu/esploro/outputs/9949333758902959>.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*, Comparative American Cities (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Miyata, "'Setting Atlanta in Motion': The Making and Unmaking of Atlanta's 'Public' Transit, 1952-1981."

<sup>15</sup> Keating, *Atlanta*.



public transit system that guarded a distinctly white identity. Even though the MARTA system avoided the spatial havoc that the Atlanta Expressway pushed upon neighborhoods, the initial plans for MARTA achieved many of the same goals. It snaked around Black communities, a nearby but inaccessible form of transit. Faced with a rail system that did not respect their needs, Black residents shifted their focus to collective, city-wide action.

Given the opportunity to transform MARTA into a system that satisfied the needs of African Americans, advocacy groups quickly unified into a significant political power, cementing the collective effectiveness of the city's Black organization efforts. The core of Black opposition to MARTA stemmed from the 1966 Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference, in which members of various activist organizations voted to oppose the plans until they achieved adequate connectivity to west-side Black neighborhoods, even if it meant voting against preliminary routes serving their own.<sup>16</sup> Thus, neglected neighborhoods mobilized their populations to vote down the initial proposal en masse, resulting in winning votes only for the business elite-heavy DeKalb and Fulton counties and forcing Atlanta to make significant changes to their route planning.<sup>17</sup> Characterized by immediate multiregional coalitions, Black activism made swift strides to reshape MARTA routing to better serve their neighborhoods.

In 1967, MARTA finally invited Black advocates to discuss changes to goals and route planning, including those involved in the Atlanta Summit. In this meeting, Summit leaders requested not only better connectivity, but a written, explicit commitment to serving Black, working-class communities with the system.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, they requested a longer west line and detailed descriptions of the right-of-ways required for the project. The resulting vote against the 1968 referendum brought some change when MARTA gave the east-west line "first priority" and implemented an affirmative action plan. Atlanta residents and surrounding communities accepted this plan in 1971, with the city's 43 percent of registered Black voters contributing 54.8 percent of their vote.<sup>19</sup> Even though the deeply collaborative Black

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<sup>16</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*.

<sup>17</sup> Miyata, "'Setting Atlanta in Motion': The Making and Unmaking of Atlanta's 'Public' Transit, 1952-1981."

<sup>18</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*.

<sup>19</sup> Miyata, "'Setting Atlanta in Motion': The Making and Unmaking of Atlanta's 'Public' Transit, 1952-1981."

activism of the late 1960s successfully shaped MARTA, the incredible difficulty of this process foreshadowed a much more destructive transit project that required similarly intense and collaborative protest.

Responding to decaying inner neighborhoods and a need for transportation from Atlanta's surrounding suburbs, the city unveiled four plans for a new interstate highway in 1964, kickstarting a competitive neighborhood opposition process. Following I-75 to create a parallel route in the northeast, Interstate 485 sought to connect downtown with growing suburbs in Gwinnett, Cobb, DeKalb, and Clayton Counties.<sup>20</sup> Almost immediately, residents of a northwest Atlanta suburb formed the Morningside Lenox Park Association (MLPA) in opposition to the project. Due to their position as a wealthy neighborhood, the MLPA hired consultants to create a new route, running closer to other majority-white—but previously silent—neighborhoods such as Piedmont and Monroe. Although the creation of this new route sought to downgrade the project from a superhighway to a simpler boulevard, the plan shifted the burden of the highway onto neighborhoods who had not yet voiced their opposition to the project. A second group of Morningside residents whose homes lay in this route created the Morningside-Monroe Civic Association and began heavily lobbying for the original route. Instead of forming a unified coalition against the highway project altogether, these two groups pit neighbor against neighbor, each advocating for their respective routes. Ultimately, the city rejected the plan proposed by the MLPA outright, choosing to keep the highway fast, wide, and destructive to communities. Close to defeat, the MLPA filed a lawsuit against the Georgia Highway Department, which faced denial in 1967.<sup>21</sup> At this time, the construction of I-485 seemed inevitable, made worse by fractured and feuding neighborhood organizations.

It was not until a wider, more diverse community of activists formed that calls for highway cancellation showed promise. Property acquisition for I-485 started in 1969 involving dishonest and

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<sup>20</sup> Jake Grant, "Rearview Mirror Feature: The Atlanta Freeway Revolts," *From The Rumble Seat*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.fromtherumbleseat.com/2020/5/6/21245826/rearview-mirror-feature-the-atlanta-freeway-revolts-georgia-tech-expressway-politics-state-urban>.

<sup>21</sup> Van Hall, "The Interstate That Almost Was," *Morningside Lenox Park Association*, September 2003, [https://vahi.org/wp-content/uploads/interstate\\_that\\_almost\\_was.pdf](https://vahi.org/wp-content/uploads/interstate_that_almost_was.pdf).

manipulative tactics from the Georgia Highway Department, resulting in home values in Morningside falling dramatically. The MLPA made modest progress at this time, removing an interchange and providing assistance to residents whose homes were acquired, though progress on the project's construction remained steady.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the 1969 marked budget troubles for the project, with Georgia withholding up to \$14.5 million carryover funds.<sup>23</sup> But, in 1970, a group of primarily female activists formed a new antihighway activism organization named the Political Action Committee. The PAC utilized a methodical approach towards highway opposition, attempting to find sections of the newly-passed National Environmental Policy Act that could have implications for the highway's legality. Additionally, the families that made up the PAC went door-to-door gathering signatures with the goal of convincing community members to take another stab at I-485.<sup>24</sup> The organization had an initial success in 1971, when the MLPA agreed to align with the PAC, creating a stop order against the highway department that provided a temporary window for further activism.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the next two years, neighborhood influence turned citywide, drawing upon every neighborhood, political candidate, and electoral body considered tangential to the cause.

As the fight against I-485 stretched into the 1970s, the emerging strength of Atlanta's advocacy network became extremely clear, eventually leading to the project's cancellation. With its initial momentum solidified, the MLPA began to extend south, forming coalitions with and facilitating the creation of other neighborhood activist groups against I-485. Additionally, the MLPA found a map identifying roads around the city that will be widened or modified as part of the highway project, using it as fuel to encourage involvement outside of the directly affected neighborhoods. Suddenly, a city-wide political power aimed at stopping I-485 formed with the creation of the Atlanta Coalition on Transportation Crisis, linking the various neighborhood groups formed from the MLPA's encouragement.

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<sup>22</sup> Hall.

<sup>23</sup> "Highway Depart Mugged By Red Tape, Executive Says," *Waycross Journal-Herald*, July 7, 1969, <https://books.google.com/books?id=RCBaAAAIBAJ&lpg=PA5&dq=i%20485%20freeway%20atlanta&pg=PA5#v=onepage&q=i%20485%20freeway%20atlanta&f=false>.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, "The Interstate That Almost Was."

<sup>25</sup> "Atlanta Road Work Suspended," *The Spartanburg Herald*, November 18, 1971, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=O4UsAAAIBAJ&sjid=88wEAAAIBAJ&dq=morningside%20atlanta&pg=5622%2C3693238>.

From here, they began to formally support urbanist candidates at every level of government. This effort quickly proved fruitful; the recently-signed city charter included an “Environmental Bill of Rights,” sending a shockwave through political positions, votes, and campaign platforms. With this shift, the end of I-485 came in three parts. First was a resolution to oppose the highway’s construction in 1973, passing 15-2 and signed the same day. Next was the rejection of the Georgia Highway Department’s Environmental Impact Study for I-485 due to its failure to take into account neighborhood impact and alternate transit modes.<sup>26</sup> Finally, shortly after the November elections that year, \$80 million in government funds was shifted to the MARTA transit project.<sup>27</sup> The election of George Busbee next year in part due to the MLPA and PAC wiped I-485 from government plans, officially marking its cancellation.<sup>28</sup>

Examining the desegregation of urban amenities, the fight for equitable MARTA connectivity, and the fight against I-485 a narrative to be drawn between civil rights protest methods and antihighway activism. The initial South Atlanta Project was sufficient for tackling specific instances of neighborhood inequality. But, instead of applying these same neighborhood-level strategies while advocating for the desegregation of public services, the organization—and the protest methods they utilized—morphed to fit the larger community’s goals, redefining itself as the Atlanta Project and creating multi-neighborhood coalitions.<sup>29</sup> Following in the progressive era’s footsteps, the residents of Atlanta also recognized that an equitable MARTA system was not only an issue for their own specific communities, but formed a city-wide concern. Black residents put their sights on the Atlanta Summit, drawing from activist organizations across the city. Even though the fight against I-485 experienced a longer initial tumultuous period, the eventual success of the movement followed the same principles; when neighborhood competition within Morningside proved insufficient, the movement was revived by the Political Action Committee, sparking larger, environmentally-focused, and effective opposition. By drawing upon civil rights-era protest principles of collaboration and city-wide action, rail protest encouraged a set of protest

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<sup>26</sup> Hall, “The Interstate That Almost Was.”

<sup>27</sup> Howell Raines, “Law Permits Shift of Funds to MARTA,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 4, 1973, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-atlanta-constitution-dec-4-1973/121818621/>.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, “The Interstate That Almost Was.”

<sup>29</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*.

methods that proved effective in the fight against highways. But, the existence of railroad right-of-way has the capability of bringing in a new, complex set of local forces attempting to shape highways to fulfill their own interests.

A mode of transit that preceded the development of modern North American cities, railroads formed an extremely common urban land use pattern which became a lucrative target of redevelopment by highway planners. From its planning and inception, Atlanta placed a snaking path of freight rail alongside and in between square city blocks.<sup>30</sup> Even Boston's position as a historic city never excluded intercity railroad. Despite a lack of surface rail into the very center of the city, by 1880, tracks crossed through Cambridge, the North End, and west of Boston.<sup>31</sup> This trend of downtown railroad corridors—often un- or under-utilized—continued throughout almost every major North American city. With a predefined path through cities already established, existing rail infrastructure became an attractive source of right-of-way for highway planners looking for similar intercity transit. As a result, many highway projects took advantage of these rights of way, routing freeways in or alongside them.<sup>32</sup> Thus, individuals and institutions whose property laid adjacent to existing railroad routes offered good indicators of the sources of resistance against highway projects.

Facing similar commuting pressures as Atlanta, Boston introduced the Inner Belt in 1948, a new eight-lane radial highway bisecting Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline, Jamaica Plain, and Roxbury. During the mid-1940s, Boston's Department of Public Works eagerly waited to integrate its city into the emerging interstate highway system. By 1947, Boston published a city-wide master highway plan, detailing eight routes stemming from the city center.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the plan identified a route through the east edge of downtown, circling through southwest neighborhoods as well as the communities immediately west of the Charles River. When available, the Inner Belt follows areas of low residential

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<sup>30</sup> Western And Atlantic Railroad Company, *Map of Atlanta and Vicinity* (Atlanta, Georgia: Matthews, Northrop & Co, 1864), G3924.A8S5 1864 .W42, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2008628275>.

<sup>31</sup> Unknown author, *Boston in 1880, Showing Steam Railroads and Stations*. (Boston, Massachusetts, 1880), United States Census Bureau, [https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/boston\\_railroad\\_1880.jpg](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/boston_railroad_1880.jpg).

<sup>32</sup> "Highways Built Parallel to Railroads," AARoads Forum, April 12, 2024, <https://www.aaroads.com/forum/index.php?topic=32838.0>.

<sup>33</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt."

development. But much like the Atlanta Expressway, in areas that lack sparsely populated land, the plan states that “routes have generally been located in neighborhoods where real estate values are now low and where they are still declining.” The plan sought to encourage the development of new middle-class neighborhoods, echoing slum clearance rhetoric common during urban renewal.<sup>34</sup> Regardless, a non-destructive plan to traverse Boston’s surrounding communities did not exist, making the leveling of neighborhoods during the Inner Belt’s erection inevitable.

During initial planning for Boston’s Inner Belt, the city identified multiple routes through Cambridge, each carrying significant implications for families, businesses, and academic institutions. Early in the Inner Belt’s inception, planning and funding progress proceeded incredibly slowly with uncertainty of the project’s viability. But, in 1956, the National Interstate and Defense Highway Act covered 90



Figure 2: An aerial illustration of Boston’s master highway plan.<sup>35</sup>

percent of the Inner Belt’s funding, providing it with a path forward and facilitating much more ambitious and flexible options for the freeway’s placement.<sup>36</sup> Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Massachusetts Department of Public Works created a route passing through Central Square and dissecting Cambridgeport, following Brookline and Elm street. This route later became known as Brookline-Elm, weaving its way between—but not adjacent to—Cambridge’s two prestigious universities. Additionally, it

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<sup>34</sup> Charles A. Maguire and Associates et al., *The Master Highway Plan for the Boston Metropolitan Area : Submitted to Robert F. Bradford, Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by the Joint Board for the Metropolitan Master Highway Plan, Based upon a Traffic Survey by the Dept. of Public Works; Public Roads Administration, Federal Works Agency Participating* (Boston, 1948), <http://archive.org/details/masterhighwaypla00char>.

<sup>35</sup> Charles A. Maguire and Associates et al.

<sup>36</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson, “Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt.”

created an alternate route following the New York Central Railroad, named the Railroad route, crossing the southeastern tip of the city and bordering the Charles River.<sup>37</sup> As opposed to the Brookline-Elm route, which carefully avoided powerful academic institutions, the Railroad route ran directly adjacent to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus, but promised to displace fewer people due to the existing railroad right-of-way.<sup>38</sup>

Placed within existing residential communities, the Brookline-Elm route generated intense

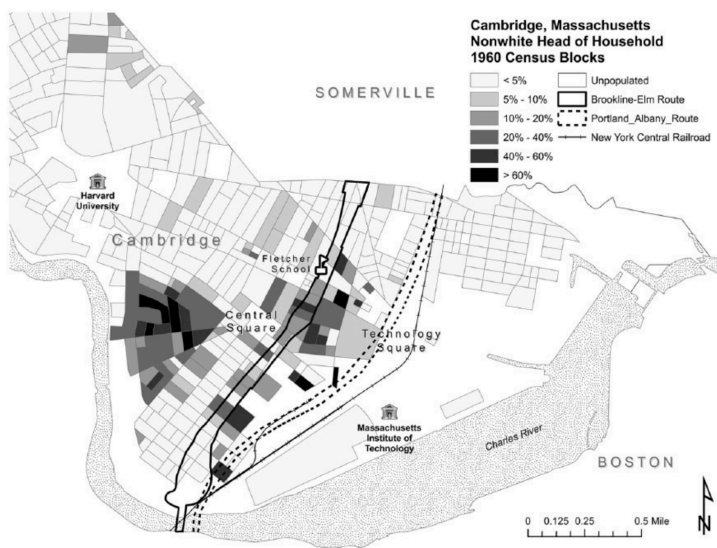


Figure 3: A map of proposed Inner Belt routes.<sup>39</sup>

opposition from the families and businesses facing displacement.

Similarly to many other urban renewal-era highways, the route intentionally pathed through a strip of Cambridge with high concentrations of non-white residents.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Cambridge residents and business owners highly despised the Brookline-Elm route, organizing opposition and

protest groups.<sup>41</sup> In Boston proper, this opposition even reached museums; Perry Rathbone, the Museum of Fine Arts' director, hosted lobbying events to oppose a highway route that attempted to weave between them and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Although the highway plans near the two museums were eventually routed underground, residential communities were not as lucky. Despite giving Cambridge veto power over any proposed highway routes in 1957, this power was revoked in 1965, pushing the

<sup>37</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

<sup>38</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt."

<sup>39</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson.

<sup>40</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson.

<sup>41</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

Brookline-Elm route back to the forefront of consideration.<sup>42</sup> What followed was a series of studies, public statements, and protests, drawing from the past decade of activism and insight.

Even though the state strongly preferred the Brookline-Elm route, MIT broke its decade-long silence regarding the Inner Belt in 1966, fearing a limit on campus expansion. Pressed into the corner of southeast Cambridge bordering the Charles River, the Railroad route limited the possibility for constructing new buildings to the north and west. Even though the Railroad route put only a slim section of MIT's existing campus in peril, the Inner Belt would create an imposing physical barrier between the new and historic parts of campus. As a result, MIT recognized an opportunity to use their technical and economic influence, forming a vehement opposition to this plan in the hope of stomping out any remaining hope for the Railroad route's construction. To do this, MIT president James Killian positioned the institution as a core contributor to Cambridge's workforce, academic prestige, and economy, citing MIT's long history of medical research, campus construction, and drawing money into the city by way of hundreds of thousands of students.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, MIT identified seventeen academic buildings threatened by one or more proposed highway routes, detailing in great length their history and significance.<sup>44</sup> MIT's position as a source of urban planning knowledge as well as a significant economic and political power led to a striking dichotomy between the activist planning efforts of its faculty and MIT's response as an institution.

But, by choosing to focus on the possible consequences for MIT as an institution as opposed to the highway's wider implications, MIT solidified an approach to highway activism that shifted suffering rather than eliminating it. Throughout multiple press releases in early 1966, MIT made sure to avoid expressing significant concern for the Inner Belt as a whole, despite its already shaky foundation.

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<sup>42</sup> Moss, Zhang, and Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt."

<sup>43</sup> James R. Killian, "M.I.T. and the Inner Belt" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, February 1966), AC0069\_196602\_011, Department of Distinctive Collections, [https://archivesspace.mit.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/5550](https://archivesspace.mit.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/5550).

<sup>44</sup> Edward B. Hanify, "STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AT A HEARING BEFORE THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL ON FEBRUARY 20, 1966, IN THE HARRINGTON SCHOOL, CAMBRIDGE, MASS," February 20, 1966, MIT Institute Archives & Special Collections, [https://cdn.libraries.mit.edu/dissemination/diponline/AC0069\\_NewReleases/NewsRelease\\_1960/AC0069\\_1966/AC0069\\_196602\\_013.pdf](https://cdn.libraries.mit.edu/dissemination/diponline/AC0069_NewReleases/NewsRelease_1960/AC0069_1966/AC0069_196602_013.pdf).



Recognizing the implications of this, MIT attempted to humanize its role in the discussion, asking readers and viewers to treat MIT as an individual as opposed to a massive, powerful institution, putting itself on the same level as Black families attempting to save their homes from destruction. Aside from a short preface mentioning the social and economic implications of the Inner Belt regardless of its location, empathy towards those whose homes would be destroyed by the Brookline-Elm route did not extend much further. MIT offered aid to fund and plan resident relocation efforts, but the promises were made knowing that any costs would be far surpassed by the funds needed to relocate its own academic buildings.<sup>45</sup> Following these press releases, many individuals against the Brookline-Elm route or the project altogether criticized MIT's response as manipulative and underdeveloped. Robert J. Samuelson from *The Harvard Crimson* wrote: "In fact, what M.I.T.'s presentation did—and did very well—was to obscure the basic issues by raising fears that are either unfounded, exaggerated, or at least poorly explained".<sup>46</sup> Specifically, MIT raised concerns surrounding the exact number of academic buildings that would be destroyed as a result of the project. Additionally, MIT described any destroyed buildings as requiring additional land to relocate, choosing not to mention utilizing space it already owned. Despite placing themselves as an important force in the city's well-being, choosing not to condemn the Inner Belt altogether in favor of advocating for the Brookline-Elm route exemplifies MIT's ultimate self-interest.

In another part of the city, a parallel highway battle raged over a second rail corridor. Despite experiencing a similar trajectory as the Inner Belt, the proposed Southwest Corridor became a formidable opponent for neighborhoods and individuals. Introduced in 1948, the Southwest Expressway planned to follow the right-of-way provided by the Boston and Providence Railroad, a historical passenger railway corridor. It began downtown and continued south, providing an attractive option to connect the center of Boston with the commuter suburbs far below it.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, it would connect Boston to the (as yet

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<sup>45</sup> Killian, "M.I.T. and the Inner Belt."

<sup>46</sup> Robert J. Samuelson, "M.I.T. Versus the Inner Belt," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 24, 1966, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1966/2/24/mit-versus-the-inner-belt-puntil/>.

<sup>47</sup> T.J. Humphrey and N.D. Clark, *Boston's Commuter Rail: The First 150 Years*, Bulletin (Boston Street Railway Association) (Boston Street Railway Association, 1985), <https://books.google.com/books?id=4J74GAAACAAJ>.

unfinished) Interstate 95, traveling vertically through Boston as opposed to the radial route seen today.<sup>48</sup>

But, unlike the Inner Belt, the project saw some progress. Its construction began in 1966 with forceful land acquisition and leveling of property, much of which belonged to multiracial communities. Even as significant citizen unrest built in response to the highway, demolition continued in Roxbury and Jamaica Plain.<sup>49</sup> The current lack of united antihighway efforts and powerful political and economic entities causing conflict and delays resulted in the Southwest Corridor avoiding a total cancellation, leading to hundreds of acres of razed land by the end of the decade.

The early fight against the Southwest Corridor was characterized by neighborhood demonstrations advocating for alteration rather than cancellation. This process was kicked off by residents of Hyde Park, Boston's most newly incorporated neighborhood. In 1962, thousands of residents flooded the Hyde Park High School to voice their disapproval, filing a symbolic petition to secede from Boston. This was followed by the neighboring communities of Roxbury and Milton, staging similar protests in schools and community centers. In response, the Boston Department of Public Works arranged poorly-constructed presentations and hearings, further fanning the fire ignited within Southwest Corridor communities. But, prior to comprehensive, city-wide opposition, many of these communities assumed that the highway's construction would be inevitable.<sup>50</sup> Similar to Inner Belt involvement by MIT and early anti-Interstate 485 activism in Atlanta, protests focused on rerouting the Southwest Corridor around or under their neighborhoods. Although they eventually sparked city-wide efforts, initial opposition did little to deter Boston from continuing construction.

Upon spreading to Jamaica Plain, advocacy supporting the complete cancellation of the project grew dramatically, leading to the creation of a coordinated committee. Led by reverends Tom Corrigan and Donald Campbell, the Association of Boston Urban Priests assembled a small group of Jamaica Plain residents in 1967 against the Southwest Corridor. The group began by advocating for a below-grade

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<sup>48</sup> Roy B. Mann, "Boston's Southwest Corridor: From Urban Battleground to Paths of Peace," *Places* 7, no. 3 (July 1, 1991), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7kj609x0>.

<sup>49</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

<sup>50</sup> Vrabel, *A People's History of the New Boston*.

highway, catching the attention of planner Fred Salvucci who assembled presentations and reports. This practical advocacy work caught the attention of prominent community leaders and professional planners, eventually leading to the formation of the Greater Boston Committee on the Transportation Crisis (GBC) in December 1968.<sup>51</sup> The GBC marked the first major multi-neighborhood advocacy network explicitly targeted at the Southwest Corridor, containing a “bizarre collection of unlikely allies.” Consisting of whites, blacks, hispanics, community leaders, militants, planners, and professional organizers, the GBC connected those with a personal stake in the highway’s cancellation with sources of urban planning, policy, and environmental knowledge, even including MIT faculty.<sup>52</sup> Lacking a unified campaign slogan, the GBC devised “STOP I-95 PEOPLE BEFORE HIGHWAYS,” which became a cornerstone of Southwest Corridor resistance. Some protest methods landed out of the ordinary; Operation STOP, the antihighway committee of Boston’s Black United Front, devised a creative method to distribute information concerning the Southwest Corridor and centralize its black resistance. Members of the group constructed a wooden “information house” in 1969 on the corner of Roxbury’s Columbus Avenue and Tremont Street. Media coverage of its construction and opening was an explicit goal of the project, with members of the press invited to various events at the location.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, the movement even included elected officials, with more than 20 state legislators declaring their opposition to the highway. By this time, intersectional, multi neighborhood, and extremely collaborative Southwest Corridor resistance had reached a momentum that proved impossible for Boston to ignore.

In the early 1970s, Boston’s collective advocacy resulted in the postponement of the city’s highway projects, ultimately leading to the cancellation of both the Inner Belt and Southwest Expressway. As Massachusetts’ new governor in 1969, Francis Williams Sargent selected MIT professor and political scientist Alan Altshuler to lead a task force focusing on transportation and highway opposition. Only a few months later, the task force presented a radical set of recommendations to the governor. Instead of casting the group off as idealistic, these recommendations significantly informed an announcement made

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<sup>51</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

<sup>52</sup> Vrabell, *A People’s History of the New Boston*.

<sup>53</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

by Sargent in 1970, which stated that highway planning rationale must place environmental protection and community preservation with the same level of importance as traffic issues.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, part of this announcement involved placing a moratorium on highway construction inside Route-128, effectively delaying the Southwest Expressway and Inner Belt. Putting actions to his words, governor Sargent assembled the Boston Transportation Planning Review (BTPR) in 1970, composed of both pro- and anti-highway planning professionals.<sup>55</sup> The BTPR set out to “conduct an open, public process to study the commonwealth’s transportation plan,” heavily involving public deliberation. Eager to step away from the urban renewal era’s complex quantitative techniques, the BTPR prioritized simple analysis methods that made it easier for citizens to understand and opened avenues to gauge highway’s effects on the environment, housing, and public health. This act shifted the trajectory of the city’s highway projects even further, creating a persistent platform for highway criticism that could easily outlast the construction moratorium. These expectations materialized almost perfectly, as new environmental scrutiny caused routes for the Southwest Corridor to disappear by 1972. The inner belt faced an even more explicit doom, with governor Sargent deciding to officially cancel the project in 1971.<sup>56</sup> Although Boston’s highway projects ultimately ended due to a set of sweeping recommendations and reviews, prior highway advocacy put environmental protection, housing, and equitable transportation as some of the top issues facing the city, facilitating their finishing blows.

By examining the range of protest methods used within Boston and Atlanta to shape highways and rail projects to better suit city residents, it is possible to divide activism into competitive and collaborative planning strategies. Highways have a unique quality in which they are incredibly detrimental to the communities they cut through, and beneficial—or at least benevolent—for the communities surrounding them. So, combative activism, such as advocating for a route that goes through a neighboring community, is bound to simply shift suffering as opposed to preventing it. In this way, MIT’s Inner Belt rhetoric and the initial efforts of Atlanta’s MLPA did not create meaningful highway

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<sup>54</sup> Crockett.

<sup>55</sup> Humphrey and Clark, *Boston’s Commuter Rail: The First 150 Years*.

<sup>56</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.

opposition, and at the very most simply delayed it. Despite not commonly being used as the first line of defense, the outcomes of each city's antihighway efforts proves that collaborative activism is capable of meaningfully protecting not just individual communities, but a city's multimodal transit as a whole.

As displayed by Boston and Atlanta, highways inherently encourage the phenomenon of competitive activism due to their parasitic relationship with public space. If communities are working in a vacuum, the obvious choice to oppose highways is to advocate for alternate routes, since it is the path of least resistance towards self preservation. This urge is driven by the perceived inevitability of large-scale infrastructure projects, often proposed by cities eager to cement themselves as a modern commuter hub. The willingness to embark upon expensive, transformative infrastructure projects was greatly encouraged by the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highway Act, which Boston and Atlanta used to relieve funding pressure and kickstart the construction process. As a result, the MLPA with I-485, MIT with the Inner Belt, and Boston neighborhoods like Hyde Park and Roxbury with the Southwest Corridor all utilized competitive protest strategies in each project's early stages. Even if these efforts did not actively promote the destruction of specific communities, their competitive nature incited activist efforts to be directed against adjacent neighborhoods. These efforts led to small-scale successes for neighborhoods like Piedmont and Monroe of Morningside, but did little to prevent a fundamental shift of urban landscape.

Even with incredibly effective local organization, antihighway efforts at the neighborhood scale are unlikely to result in cancellation of large infrastructure projects. Given this reality, communities default to the next best option, which is shaping the highway to fit their needs. This can be done in subtle, ultimately beneficial ways, such as changing lane counts or otherwise reducing the scale of the projects. Despite increasing the cost of the project, Perry Rathbone's fight to bury the section of highway passing through Fenway's Fine Arts and Stewart Gardner Museums preserved the character of their surrounding urban space. Additionally, the MLPA advocated for a smaller design of I-485 which would slightly lower vehicle speeds and require less spacious interchanges with surrounding road networks.<sup>57</sup> But, as evidenced

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<sup>57</sup> Hall, "The Interstate That Almost Was."

by the proposal's failure to be adopted, these negotiation processes are rare and often unsuccessful, pointing towards their ineffectiveness in meaningfully downscaling highway projects.

Luckily, collaborative rail-focused activism can help reverse these trends and redefine what effective transit activism looks like. Unlike freeways, passenger rail projects are often perceived as desirable for urban residents, since they utilize existing right-of-way and mesh seamlessly with manual forms of transit like walking and biking. Despite having inadequate connectivity to Black neighborhoods in its early planning, the MARTA system was viewed as flawed but potentially capable of positively shaping urban mobility, with very few neighborhoods outright rejecting stops in their communities. In contrast with initial antihighway efforts, MARTA activism originated as an inherently collaborative process, with residents voting down proposals that serve their neighborhoods with the goal of improving city-wide connectivity for Black communities. Thus, rail activism is more likely to involve many parts of a community, since improving neighborhood connectivity is perceived by underprivileged communities as a widespread public good. By respecting existing population centers rather than cutting paths through them, rail projects—and the activism that extends from them—forms mutually beneficial, back-and-forth dialogues.

But, as highway activism moved to its later stages, it began to reflect the collaborative protest methods encouraged by rail activism, to great success for communities. After the MLPA failed to reroute I-485 towards adjacent neighborhoods, the Political Action Committee revived antihighway activism in Morningside with a focus on multi-neighborhood mobilization. Rather than pushing towards the singular focus of rerouting, efforts were spread between forming partnerships with other organizations or otherwise mobilizing neighboring communities and attempting to find legal and social avenues for undermining I-485 as a whole. The PAC and the reinvigorated MLPA played to their community members' strengths, funding a policy expert for the organization and taking advantage of their population of new families by conducting door-to-door mobilization while pushing their children in strollers.<sup>58</sup> By doing so, Morningside and its neighboring communities were able to identify leads and build the

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<sup>58</sup> Hall.

community strength needed to pursue them. Forming this same pattern, Boston's Hyde Park framed their activism around shaping the Southwest Corridor to fit their local needs. Even though this initial neighborhood revolt eventually inspired similar protests in those adjacent to Hyde Park, these fractured efforts did not threaten the highway's consequences for the city. It was not until the formation of multiregional efforts like the GBC that unique neighborhood acts of protest such as the Black United Front's "information house" were able to flourish, since they were connected to a larger, regionally unified goal under the slogan "PEOPLE BEFORE HIGHWAYS." Even though both cities ultimately built up a support base out of smaller organizations, they experienced a significant period of uncertainty, even leading to the forced relocation of thousands of Boston residents. Immediately adopting collaborative, city-wide strategies to combat a city-wide infrastructure threat, much like Black resistance to MARTA, may have spared the homes of many individuals.

Since I-485's demise, Atlanta's culture, national significance, and population centers have changed significantly. In addition to the downtown core's steady growth, Midtown, a region of the city east of the Georgia Institute of Technology, rose to prominence in the 1980s. But, throughout this transformation process, existing rail corridors throughout the city remain the same. To serve the city's shifting needs, Atlanta planner Ryan Gravel proposed the BeltLine in 1999, a 22-mile light-rail project that forms a loop connecting Atlanta's surrounding communities alongside many links to downtown. In addition, the project's modern iteration includes a network of parks, trails, and affordable housing developments. Crucially, community engagement is core to the project, involving a series of outreach programs in direct contact with the neighborhoods crossed by the system.<sup>59</sup> Similar models of urban transportation projects appearing throughout the United States represent equitable transit networks that explicitly cater to neighborhood needs, opting for a community-led iteration process that largely sidesteps the need for transit-related protests.

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<sup>59</sup> Atlanta BeltLine, "Project Goals: Transit," Atlanta Beltline, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://beltline.org/the-project/project-goals/project-goal-transit>.

In the decades after the fall of Boston's highway projects, the Southwest Corridor's reclamation of highway space into an explicitly multi-modal hub signaled the diminishing pull of urban renewal policy in Boston more than any other project of its time. The expressway's cancellation and subsequent transformation into a hub for rail transit and green space not only connected local neighborhoods, but facilitated transit throughout the city. After the MBTA made sure that the southwest expressway was truly dead, the city replaced the land razed for the project into two new Orange Line tracks and three Northeast Corridor tracks. Alongside them was a new park that utilized the rest of the cleared right-of-way, creating foot and cycle paths reconnecting the neighborhoods that the potential highway would have intersected.<sup>60</sup> By creating a hybrid of local parks and connections to the city-wide rail network, Boston effectively reversed the division of neighborhoods adjacent to the highway corridor while fulfilling the same promise of mass transit initially made by the expressway.

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<sup>60</sup> Crockett, *People before Highways*.



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