

# Dislocation or Destruction – On Freeways in Oakland

written by Guest Contributor | August 17, 2016



When my partner and I first moved to Oakland, to California, we lived in a small apartment off Telegraph Avenue on 33rd Street situated in an awkward in-between; the burgeoning beer gardens of Uptown were ten blocks south and the burgeoning boutiques of Temescal were ten blocks north, but we belonged to neither neighborhood. What we did belong to, lived next door to, was a massive freeway interchange, the intersection of Interstate 580 and the point where Interstate 980 becomes State Route 24. It is a four-story diamond-shaped complex of fly-over ramps above an eight-lane highway above a surface street (34th Street) above another eight-lane highway. The interchange made its presence known at all times—we cleaned dark particulate matter from our window sills and furniture and at night were kept by the constant almost aquatic rush of its traffic. We lived there for a while then moved “deeper” into Oakland. That’s the word people use here, deeper, which means we followed the freeways’ path parallel to the Bay as they cut east, southeast, away from the Pacific. We moved to a neighborhood called the Dimond District, which I love and which is also only a few blocks from Interstate 580.

This freeway is, I would argue, the only reasonable way to travel from where I live to more central areas where most of the city’s services are. There is no direct surface street, the interstate replaced it. One could take the route of the crosstown bus, MacArthur Boulevard, but its path—directly adjacent to the freeway, winding randomly here on the north side and there on the south, interrupted often by on- and off-ramps that guide the unvigilant back onto the interstate—is prohibitively confusing for the average driver. It is as if the street were an afterthought. In fact, this might be true: what is now called MacArthur is the un-elevated, un-freewayed remnant of former U.S. Route 50, one of the longest highways in the country before the interstate system that ran from Maryland to San Francisco. Route 50 was made a major thoroughfare to the Bay Bridge in the 1930s by the linking of several separate streets; by my home it was called Hopkins. It was a street that ran the length of Oakland west to east, as Telegraph and Broadway run north to south. It is easy to imagine that the highway engineers who ribboned the city with concrete chose Route 50 to expand and elevate without much controversy, turning a reasonable neighborhood-friendly boulevard into the monster

expressway that currently connects the East Bay suburbs and beyond with San Francisco and, in a way, dislocates my neighborhood and others around it from the city as a whole.

One appropriate verb for a freeway's movement is to cut. In 1959, during the height of zealous and extensive freeway construction in America when the white highwaymen of the Eisenhower era were unwittingly given the role of city planner, the city of San Francisco rejected seven of nine freeways scheduled for construction in its city limits. These freeways were going to cut through and, it was argued, ruin invaluable public spaces, such as Golden Gate Park and the Embarcadero's Ferry Building, in addition to the property values of homes in picturesque districts like the Sunset, Glen Park, and the Marina.

No such freeway revolt succeeded across the Bay, despite similar plans and similar forms of opposition from, for example, neighborhood preservationist groups. No revolt succeeded here and as a result there are very few places you can live in Oakland without living near a freeway. Interstate 80 runs in the city briefly before entering the western Bay shoreline of Emeryville and Berkeley. Interstate 880 cuts southward from 80; it demolished once thriving black and working-class neighborhoods to follow the city's industrialized waterfront with the Oakland Estuary. State Route 24 cuts down from the affluent East Bay hills through dense white neighborhoods like Rockridge, where two-bedroom homes now sell for upward of one million dollars. State Route 13 is imbedded in the Oakland hills, running from south Berkeley (where it is not a freeway but an avenue called Ashby) and rejoining 580 on Oakland's eastern border. Interstate 980 is a confounding two-mile connector of Route 24 and 880 that separates downtown Oakland from the neighborhoods of West Oakland where poverty is common and access to city necessities, like grocery stores, is limited. West Oakland is in fact entirely encircled: by 880 on the south and west, 580 on the north, 980 on the east. With the exception of 980 and Route 13, all of these freeways lead to the Bay Bridge. In contrast, consider neighboring Berkeley, where there is only one freeway: 80, previously mentioned, which practically sits on the water far from most everything.

I use freeways to drive within Oakland from my neighborhood every day. For less than five minutes, for one or two exits. It's difficult to avoid them, as it was when we lived virtually underneath the interchange. Urban expressways were intended to bring far-away suburbs closer to a city's so-called central business district; were they also intended for minor errands? I find myself adapting to Californian speeds. I find myself thinking seriously, for the first time, about freeways. I think: To what am I guided every day? I have the impression of Oakland as one massive freeway staging-ground leading to more desirable elsewhere, a city the highwaymen deemed to be traveled through at high-speeds, not in.

Why? I assume because Oakland lacked political clout in the 1950s and 60s when the concrete came through. When people here spoke out, I assume no one cared to listen. I assume because it is a diverse city from which whites fled

in the years after World War II, or because of the redlining (race-based home mortgage refusals) of the 1930s, when minority neighborhoods that now contain freeways were described by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation as "Splendidly situated for a 'slum clearance' project." *Slum clearance*, one of those innocuous phrases designed to mask reality, was a major if unofficial goal of the placement of urban expressways all across the country. As Raymond Mohl writes in his 2002 study *The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt*:

*Displaying a "two-birds-with-one stone" mentality, cities and states sought to route interstate expressways through slum neighborhoods, using federal highway money to reclaim downtown urban real estate. Inner-city slums could be cleared, blacks removed to more distant second-ghetto areas, central business districts redeveloped, and transportation woes solved all at the same time ... As one former federal highway official conceded in a 1972 interview, the urban interstates gave city officials "a good opportunity to get rid of the local niggertown."*

The irony, of course, is that freeways did not eliminate "slums" but helped create them, through a new urbanity of concrete and shadow and dislocation. Building a freeway requires extensive demolition. People must be moved, their homes destroyed, for traffic to flow.

Late on November 24, 2014, after Darren Wilson was not indicted by a grand jury for murdering Michael Brown in Ferguson, a large group of protestors marched past our tiny apartment on 33rd Street and climbed onto Interstate 580. They brought traffic to a standstill and created a brilliant tense chaos in which everything stopped except the awareness of that injustice. We were home at the time, and we watched people stream past on the street out our front windows, watched the accumulation of immobile red taillights on the freeway out our back windows, felt amidst an invasion from above by the constant encircling whir of multiple helicopters shining their whitest spotlights on the freeway, on the chanting protestors, intermittently through our windows. They were news helicopters and police helicopters. What we couldn't see through our windows or on Telegraph, lit by fires set in dumpsters and placed in the road as barricades, we saw streamed on the website of the local news from the eye of the helicopters. Soon the bright red and blue lights of the police mixed with the taillights and the fires and the spotlights and the din into what I remember as the quintessence of conflict. We were sheltered, but surrounded.

This was of course not the first time a freeway or a major traffic thoroughfare, like a bridge, has been blocked as a tool of modern demonstration and protest (I have found newspaper records of similar actions from groups as varied as the famous Selma civil rights marchers to angry college sports fans in L.A. to antiwar demonstrators in Seattle to AIDS awareness groups on the Golden Gate Bridge), and it wasn't the last, especially not in Oakland. Most recently, after the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, demonstrators walked onto 880, walked up the on-ramp nearest to the Oakland police headquarters and blocked all north- and

southbound lanes. The aerial images of this action are beautiful, how the crush of cars fills the architecture of the freeway with light then stops, blocked by a smaller but substantive crush of dark human figures.

I (and others, including [Emily Badger at the Washington Post](#)) see now, in a way I was too distracted to see in 2014, how resonant an action this is. It would not be so easy to walk on a freeway if its ramps were not placed so near to where people walk. Freeways are profoundly inhuman; they are monoliths placed by white engineers often amid communities of color which allowed—by design—these communities to be bulldozed and shadowed by elevated concrete or divided by vast below-grade canyons. Freeways are also, now, vital to our vehicularly dependent way of life. When masses of human bodies reclaim these inhuman invasive spaces and stand barricaded against the flow of traffic heading to more desirable elsewhere they dislocate us all, spectators and participants and caught commuters, and proclaim unequivocally that the expected flow—with its racism and privilege and exploitation—must be altered. This action forces attention onto the effects of the freeway's physicality, so often ignored. Like a clot in an artery it reminds us that our social body ails, is failing many among us.

"To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it," the Rev. Dr. King said in a front-page article in the August 16, 1967, edition of the *New York Times*, "can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer-lasting, costly to the society but not wantonly destructive." He said this regarding his plans to stage "massive civil disobedience" in northern cities; he said this after he "briefly discussed jamming the freeways of Chicago." To *dislocate*: to disturb not only the physical location of a thing but also its normal arrangement and organization, to disrupt. Although Dr. King attempts to put *dislocation* and *destruction* on opposite ends of a continuum, it is subtle in his qualifications ("dislocate ... *without* destroying"; "*wantonly* destructive") that the two often sit hand-in-hand.

When we think of how our cities should or should not evolve, a heated topic in the Bay Area especially with its lack of housing and abundance of gentrification and displacement and dislocation, we do not often consider freeways. As monoliths they seem in a way eternal. They are not. On October 17, 1989, a portion of Interstate 880 in West Oakland—the double-decked freeway known as the Cypress Structure or the Cypress Street Viaduct that connected the expressway with the Bay Bridge toll plaza—was destroyed, not merely dislocated, by the Loma Prieta earthquake. The top tier "slid," according to one witness, onto the lower; forty-two people were killed in their cars. This Structure, which opened in 1957 at the height of the highwaymen's zeal, cut through and divided several residential neighborhoods and decimated commercial districts along Cypress Street, so when it fell and was cleared away and its shadow lifted, partitioned communities were suddenly made whole. And when California's transportation engineers drew plans to rebuild the Structure in the same way in the same place, those communities fought. In February 1991, as they had not been able to do when they fought the freeway nearly forty years earlier, those communities won—the state capitulated and announced it would rebuild the missing portion of 880 farther

west, along the industrialized shoreline and away from the neighborhood.

Today Cypress Street is called Mandela Parkway. Something other than the relatively pristine pavement, other than the landscaped pedestrian-friendly median wide as the former viaduct, other than the new mixed-use condo developments being rushed into this neighborhood only a twenty-minute train ride from downtown San Francisco, betrays the street's novelty. Something one can sense without seeing.

I frequently imagine what my neighborhood would be like without Interstate 580. Quieter, less imposed on by wind-borne trash. Easy walks could be taken both north and south of where it used to stand, there would be no overpasses blocking the view of the hills and accumulating underneath all the detritus of a city's neglect. This neighborhood and those around it have managed relatively well with the freeway for half a century, we are not encircled by it nor living in its shadow, but I imagine the boulevard, the parkway, the landscaped median, the human landscape, that would stand in place of the eight elevated lanes. But my thoughts have always tended toward the utopian. I'm sure, barring significant destruction and disaster, 580 will remain an essential artery in the circulatory system of the cities through which it passes, not just Oakland. Other freeways might not last—the group [Connect Oakland](#) has drafted impressive plans for the replacement of underused Interstate 980 with a boulevard and much-needed housing, and President Obama's transportation secretary [Anthony Foxx has publically decried freeways](#) as engines of blight—but mine will. Because a freeway also connects, and some communities and populations are dependent on its connections.

Dislocation and destruction. Freeways have trafficked in both. Now we live with them, live above or around or under them. Some of us drive on them for days on end or for hours a day; some of us walk on them in brave barricades, some set up shelter in their shadows, in tents under viaducts and ramps where most are loath to go. We are, I am, engrained in their architecture. To imagine our dislocation from them is exceedingly difficult. So—is this all I can do?—I advocate for their dislocation, as they have dislocated. Use your freeway not just as a tool for transport, draw attention to its physical dimensions and how it has imposed itself on you and your surroundings, trace its avenues of disruption. Disrupt it in turn. At the very least, savor those moments made silent by the absence of its traffic.

Suggestions for further reading: Additional recent scholarship on the causes and effects of urban freeways includes Joseph DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (2013) and Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (2014).

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Christopher J. Adamson's poetry, creative nonfiction, and criticism can soon be found in *ZYZZYVA*, *Southwest Review*, and *Boston Review*, among other publications. He works as an academic support coach for potential first-generation college students in Oakland. [christopherjadamson.com](http://christopherjadamson.com)