

CAR CULTURE PROMPTS BIG QUESTIONS FOR SCHOLARS

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Among other lessons, the rise of the automobile offers us a case study in unintended consequences — or perhaps multiple potential case studies. Certainly, we have become increasingly aware of carbon emissions and their cumulative damage to Earth’s atmosphere and climate. As scholars, we should also remember the history of how freeways have forever altered our landscape.

In the United States, the interstate highway system was hailed as one of the greatest civil engineering accomplishments of the 20th century. The speed and freedom with which we now travel between cities, suburbs, and rural areas would not have been possible without herculean efforts to unify the country on a national scale. In the 1950s and ’60s, hundreds of meandering state and county roads were replaced by wide, well-planned expressways carrying drivers smoothly from one exit to the next.

But these large-scale achievements also necessitated large-scale demolition and were often accompanied by “urban renewal” projects that tore down homes, businesses, and entire neighborhoods to make way for multi-

lane highways connecting downtown areas with their surrounding suburbs.

My daily commute takes me through a stretch of road where eight lanes of traffic are suddenly squeezed into four, a perpetual bottleneck that puzzled me until I learned the history of local resistance to the proposed Boston “Inner Belt” expressway. Over 16 years, residents rallied at public meetings and on Boston Common. They even organized a bus trip to Washington, D.C., so that dozens of families could voice their opposition to bulldozing houses for highways. In 1971, the Inner Belt plan was rejected once and for all.

I live in a house built in 1856, constructed by an Irish immigrant who worked in a nearby pit to dig red clay, which was then fired in one of our local brickyards to create the materials for iconic Boston buildings and sidewalks. One of these brickyards still stands in my neighborhood, its kilns and factory floor converted into an open-plan office park with a popular restaurant and coffee shop. If urban renewal had succeeded, it might have vanished, along with my house, subsumed in a modernizing push to raze dilapidated neighborhoods and replace narrow, potholed streets with gleaming swaths of concrete.

Our love affair with the automobile at first blinded us to the dangers of its byproducts. We gained autonomy at the price of climate sustainability. We gained convenience but lost many of our older inner-city neighborhoods, whose populations were evicted, displaced to outer suburbs, and often excluded from economic prosperity in the longer term.

Recently, photos of a house in China engulfed by a new expressway went viral on social media. The owner refused to sell his property to the road’s developers, and it is now sandwiched between four lanes of traffic, one of many such buildings labeled a “nail house” or *ding zi hu*, disrupting the flow of development like a stubborn nail sticking up from a floorboard.

The homeowner has stated that he now regrets his opposition to the project. But maybe these photos should prompt us to reflect on the lessons of unintended consequences.



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