Highways to Boulevards: Network-Based Solutions

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How Portland, Oregon, removed a riverfront freeway in 1974 and relied on its street network to handle traffic, grow transportation choices, restore street vitality and become the economic center of the region

Portland’s Harbor Drive

In the history of American freeway teardowns, Portland’s Harbor Drive holds an auspicious position. It stands as the first major highway to be intentionally removed. In 1950, Harbor Drive, running adjacent to downtown along the western bank of the Willamette River, became Portland’s first limited-access highway, carrying U.S. Route 99W. As more freeways were built in the city during the 1960s—including Interstate 84 on the eastern bank of the Willamette and Interstate 5, a western bypass around downtown—Harbor Drive became less important as a long-haul freeway route. In the early 1970s, the average daily traffic using Harbor Drive was about 24,000 vehicles, including approximately 2,500 heavy trucks accessing nearby industrial areas.

Highway Removal

In the late 1960s, newly elected Governor Tom McCall pledged his support for the beautification of the west bank of the Willamette River, transforming it into a park. Alternatives were proposed for the area, including various tunnel options, but none proved too expensive. Citizens, led by the Riverfront for Citizens Coalition, called for a park and boulevard option. McCall ultimately backed the boulevard option and in 1974, Harbor Drive was closed for reconstruction.

The Boulevard

The direct footprint of Harbor Drive was converted into parkland and more park acreage was created by demolishing industrial and commercial buildings that bordered the freeway along Front Avenue. Front Avenue was widened into a landscaped boulevard to handle the local traffic and was later renamed as Naito Parkway. In 1978, construction of the 37-acre Waterfront Park was completed and, in 1984, it was named after Governor Tom McCall. The city extended Waterfront Park to the south in 1999, doubling the size of the park.

Economic Development

The success of Portland’s downtown is widely known and the demolition of Harbor Drive took a big step forward in that process. Key developments like Yards Union Station to the north and RiverPlace to the south led to a resurgence in downtown housing.

The city continues to develop waterfront plans to build on the river as an asset. The Portland Development Commission’s Downtown Waterfront Development Strategies Project aims to increase mixed-use development along the length of the waterfront and three blocks from the waterfront. This is in recognition of the dramatic increases in property value that have resulted from the replacement of Harbor Drive with an at-grade boulevard.
"Harbor Drive was opened in 1943 to become 99-W in Portland. Gradually, it had been supplanted by Interstate-5, but it has acted as a barrier to pedestrians wishing to walk along the riverbank.

That will be easier now.

Traffic will be re-routed onto SW Front Avenue, but motorists are encouraged to seek alternatives to this street a half-block away."

The Oregonian, Thursday May 23, 1974
“The people have recaptured the river in downtown Portland after more than a century:

Let’s never let it go.

The closure of Harbor Drive…will cause considerable traffic dislocation and probably, at least for a time, traffic confusion and inconvenience. But, in the long view, it is the thing to do…”

The Oregonian, Thursday May 23, 1974
streets link important destinations

Portland street network
Portland riverfront today
places for people
CNU’s Project for Transportation Reform

The Right Fix for Our Streets. The Right Fix for Our Communities.

CNU’s Project for Transportation Reform stands for the revitalization of our communities’ streets. The initiatives within the project call for multi-modal street designs that place the pedestrian back into the public realm, encourage greater safety and public health, and advocate for the fundamentals of street networks that enrich our sense of place.
Street networks fulfill a basic need in human society. They connect people to each other and to destinations. Street networks are not just about transportation and infrastructure, but also about the movement of people, goods, ideas, and wealth. They foster economic activity and provide public space for human interaction. Street networks form an effective, flexible framework for building a community, in every sense of the word.
“Street networks are not just about transportation and infrastructure, but also about the movement of people, goods, ideas and wealth.”

“They foster economic activity and provide public space for human interaction.”
All people should be able to travel within their community in a safe, dignified and efficient manner. A sustainable street network makes that possible and ensures a choice of transportation modes and routes. People can walk, bicycle, take transit, or use a vehicle. Each mode is integrated, as appropriate, within each street. A sustainable street network gets you to your destination, and back.
“All people should be able to travel within their community in a safe, dignified and efficient manner.”

“Each mode is integrated, as appropriate, within each street.”

“A sustainable street network gets you to your destination, and back.”
transportation choices
build it and they will come

20 MPH winds? Periods of heavy rain highlighted by flying leaves? Bah! Nothing. Went through the traffic signal at Madison and Grand as part of a group of 18 bicycle commuters.
Street networks provide a template for a rich combination of housing, shopping, and transportation choices. They support a robust mix of culture and commerce. Sustainable street networks are magnets for business, light industry, jobs, and economic opportunities.
“Street networks provide a template for a rich combination of housing, shopping and transportation choices.”

“They support a robust mix of culture and commerce.”

“Sustainable street networks are magnets for business, light industry, jobs and economic opportunities.”
The scale and orientation of streets in the network celebrate the unique local and regional characteristics of the natural and built environment. These include architectural features, climate, geography, topography, and history.
“The scale and orientation of streets in the network celebrate the unique local and regional characteristics of the natural and built environment.”
streets link important destinations
A sustainable street network respects, protects and enhances the natural features and ecological systems of its urban environment. The result? A balanced and symbiotic community. It integrates stormwater treatment into street design and incorporates stormwater flow and wildlife habitat zones into the street network. The sustainable street network responds to natural features, resources, and systems by adjusting street density and connectivity. The sustainable street network considers the broad spectrum of relationships to natural systems, including those that are site specific, regional, and global.
“A sustainable street network respects, protects, and enhances the natural features and ecological systems of its urban environment.”

“It integrates stormwater treatment into street design and incorporates stormwater flow and wildlife habitat zones into the street network.”

“…it considers the broad spectrum of relationships to natural systems, including those that are site specific, regional, and global.”
seven principles and six key characteristics

“Street networks maximize connectivity.”

“…create desirable places where multiple networks overlap.”

“…are inherently complex.”

‘…include major streets that are designed to be the “Great Streets” of the community…’

“All streets are safe and walkable.”

“…provide a wide range of street types, each with a role in the network.”
How Portland, Oregon, removed a riverfront freeway in 1974 and relied on its street network to handle traffic, grow transportation choices, restore street vitality and become the economic center of the region.
Thank you
additional information

* Congress for the New Urbanism Project for Transportation Reform
  http://www.cnu.org/transportationreform

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