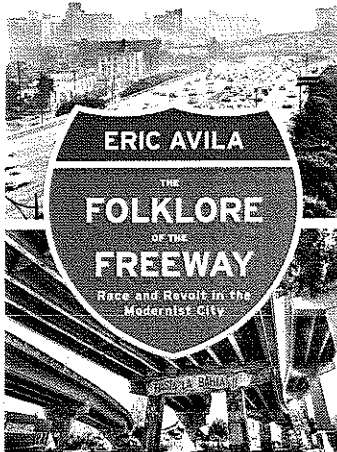


Book Reviews



The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City. Eric Avila. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 248 pp., 27 b&w photos, 16 color plates.

Prof. Eric Avila of UCLA has written a thoughtful account of the impact of the construction of the American Interstate highway system on the urban barrios and ghettos it often traversed. The impact, he argues, included both the destruction of those communities and the fragmentation and isolation of their remnants which have, in its wake, adapted and moved on.

The book's primary focus is the "folklore" that emerged in response to the urban Interstates. Avila defines folklore broadly to include poetry, prose, paintings, graffiti, murals, photography, music, dance and performance. He further focuses on the interaction between this and the contemporaneous emergence of movements such as feminism, civil rights, historic preservation, conservation and environmentalism.

Avila mostly avoids applying twenty-first-century norms and values to decisions of the 1950s — a risk of any endeavor such as this book. One new insight he does provide, however (to this reviewer anyway), is how the location and development of the urban Interstates can be seen as a consequence of efforts by leading downtown interests to preserve the value of their properties and businesses in the face of the massive decentralization and suburbanization of American cities after World War II. The Interstate program was a handmaiden to this effort, with the federal government paying 90 percent of the construction cost.

City leaders' biggest fear at that time was that they would miss out on the Interstate as a tool to preserve the competitiveness of central business districts (see, e.g., G.T. Schwartz, "Urban Freeways and the Interstate System," *Southern California Law Review*, Vol. 49 No. 3 (1976), pp. 406–513). If that meant disrupting a few ghettos and barrios, well, such was the cost of progress — and besides, removal of "urban blight" was an accepted policy remedy of the time. These leaders also didn't mind sacrificing a few parks, riverfronts, and wealthy neighborhoods, if necessary — even if they were often stopped from doing so.

Avila's book ably presents a different perspective. Even if the decision-makers of the time didn't view their actions as being racist or discriminatory, they certainly may have seemed that way to those whose communities were destroyed or divided.

An important missed point is that the Interstate had significant benefits for minorities, especially African Americans. This point was made by General Colin Powell in a June 29, 2006, speech to the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, celebrating the Interstate program's fiftieth anniversary. Powell recalled that soon after his commissioning in 1958 he and his wife traveled to Fort Benning, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama. At the time they knew of only two hotels, one in South Carolina and another in Bristol, Tennessee, where "a black person could find a bed for the night." He credits the Interstate highway system for helping usher in a system of hotels and restaurants where blacks would be served like anyone else.

A second missed point is that the minority communities affected by the Interstates weren't the only ones who learned from it. The experience of the Interstate system and reactions against it brought massive changes in the statutory and regulatory framework

affecting major infrastructure development, including relocation assistance and environmental and community impact assessment and mitigation.

An illustration of the extent to which such impacts are now incorporated into public-works decision-making is this statement from a 2000 document by the Montana Department of Transportation, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and the U.S. Federal Highway Administration governing the improvement of U.S. Highway 93 in Montana:

Before any design concepts for the road were conceived, it was essential to get a better understanding of the land, what makes it unique, and how the Salish and Kootenai people relate to the land. The design of the reconstructed highway is premised on the idea that the road is a visitor and that it should respond to and be respectful of the land and the Spirit of Place. Understanding the Spirit of Place — the whole continuum of what is seen, touched, felt, and traveled through — provides inspiration and guidance, and leads to design solutions uniquely suited to the special qualities of the place.

The Spirit of Place includes more than just the road and adjacent areas — it consists of the surrounding mountains, plains, hills, forest, valley, and sky, and the paths of waters, glaciers, winds, plants, animals, and native peoples. . . . (“Landscape Architect Design and Alignment Concepts — Steps in the Design Process for US 93,” in US 93 Memorandum of Agreement — Evaro to Polson, available at [ftp://ftp.mdt.mt.gov/download/jlg/001DC.pdf](http://ftp.mdt.mt.gov/download/jlg/001DC.pdf).)

Ironically, the tribes are now considering whether to widen the road to enhance access to a contemplated new casino.

The book touches on the history of large-scale infrastructure projects, like Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards (pp.9–10). But it doesn’t tackle the difficult question of how to do this in a socially beneficial way. Robert Moses comes in for a bit of a shellacking, but there is no acknowledgement that thirty years after Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker* (New York: Knopf, 1974), even Moses’s reputation is being rehabilitated. Thus, in 2007, three New York museums held a collective show about Moses that emphasized how invaluable the infrastructure he built was to the city’s current revitalization (see H. Ballon and K.T. Jackson, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

The key point here is that implementing a large program like the Interstate system is a learning process. Of course there are mistakes, but we correct them and do better. It should not be a matter of condemning and vilifying. The late, great Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, put it well:

*There is a kind of stasis that is beginning to settle into our public life. We cannot reach decisions. Central Park could not conceivably be built today as it was when there was enough power in Tammany Hall to make the decision. Four and a half years after they dug the first spade of earth for the new I.R.T., Commodore Vanderbilt rode the length of it in his private subway car. They laid the cornerstone of the Empire State Building on St. Patrick’s Day in 1930, and it was up in 15 months. We don’t have that capacity. I worry that we’re fearful that we won’t be as good as the people who came before us. . . . If you start thinking that you’ve been outperformed by your predecessors, you’ve begun to lose confidence, haven’t you? And that’s not a good condition. I guess I’m as good a preservationist as you will find, but I fear the kind of preservationism that preserves out of fear that nothing equivalent could be done in the present. (As quoted in Alan Finder, “Westway, a Road That Was Paved with Mixed Intentions; Losing Confidence and Opportunities: Daniel Patrick Moynihan,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1985.)*

The book contains a few excesses. Were the highway builders really “executioners” (p.15)? Was Jane Jacobs’s *Death and Life* really a “defense of racial and class privilege” because it “said nothing about the radical forces of capitalism that ravaged her neighborhood, pushing out factories, affordable housing, and struggling artists while enforcing broader disparities of race, wealth, and poverty” (pp.66–67)?

Despite its occasional overstatements, *The Folklore of the Freeway* is a valuable contribution to understanding the diverse impacts of urban megaprojects. Such projects are more a hallmark of the twentieth century than the twenty-first — so far, anyway. Should a new generation of megaprojects emerge, we may face such challenges again. Will California’s high-speed rail truly blast through exclusive preserves like Palo Alto? More likely it will end up traversing today’s disenfranchised communities. But the treatment of those communities and displaced people will be much better, thanks in large part to what we learned building the Interstates.

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