Amy D. Finstein

Modern Mobility Aloft: Elevated Highways, Architecture, and Urban Change in Pre-Interstate America

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020, 304 pp., 12 maps, 103 b/w illus. $115.50 (cloth), ISBN 9781439919170; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 9781439919187

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act into law, making possible a "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways." Since then, the interstates—with their ubiquitous red-white-and-blue shield-shaped signs—have dominated public consciousness and everyday experience of limited-access, high-speed motorways in the United States. Nowhere is their impact more apparent than in U.S. cities still dealing with the consequences of a fraught trifecta of interstates, urban renewal, and racial segregation. New York's Cross Bronx Expressway (I-95) and New Orleans's Claiborne Expressway (I-10) are two notorious midcentury interstates whose social and environmental devastations were obvious from the moment the roads opened. Boston's John F. Fitzgerald Expressway (I-93), constructed from 1951 to 1959 and better known as the Central Artery, is another high-profile example. Kevin Lynch analyzed the Central Artery in *The Image of the City* (1960), Helen Leavitt attacked it in *Superhighway—Superhoax* (1970), and Tom Lewis offered a measured critique of it in *Divided Highways* (1997), which was published as work was under way to demolish the elevated portion of the highway and replace it with a tunnel.[1] This "Big Dig" (1991–2007), as the megaproject was known, is the starting point and the conclusion to Amy D. Finstein's *Modern Mobility Aloft*, which tells the story of three urban elevated highways in "pre-interstate America," roughly 1890 to 1960.

For Finstein, the specific decades are less significant than what they augured for metropolitan development in the United States, bracketing the years between "the heyday of the railroads" and "the advent of mass automobility" (2). Tracking the shift from train to car is central to Finstein's argument about urban change in the first half of the twentieth century, and her chronological framing usefully moves beyond conventional periodizations in architecture and planning histories that focus on the years before and after the world wars. In contrast, this book offers a narrative that demonstrates the continuity of city planning and infrastructure construction activities, despite disruptions caused by economic and military crises, whether national or global. Finstein's selected elevated highways represent three different cities and three distinct pre-interstate moments: Wacker Drive in Chicago, the West Side Elevated Highway in New York, and, as already noted, Boston's Central Artery. Because the Central Artery was first proposed in 1930, Finstein argues, convincingly, that it is best understood as a project of the pre-interstate era. It is important to note, however, that Finstein's case studies are meant to be representative. As she observes early on, with the proliferation of the automobile early in the twentieth century, cities across the United States, from Philadelphia to Seattle, embraced elevated highways as immediate solutions to their urban ills.

Another key dimension of Finstein's study is her tight focus on the urban elevated highway as a very specific roadway typology, one whose location in the dense core of the city combined with engineering and architecture to produce a distinct kind of modern monument. Indeed, in Finstein's telling, urban elevated highways were not just modern, they were also modernist, embodying up-to-date formal stylings, advanced technology, a romanticized conception of automotive transportation, and an approach to urban design that situated the elevated roadway as a distinctive object within emerging landscapes of modernity. In this sense, Finstein views the urban elevated highway as a parallel to the skyscraper, simultaneously an icon and engine of urban change and densification, existing within the urban fabric but also physically separated from its supposed premodern chaos. This is a compelling argument, and Finstein provides ample evidence to support it in each successive chapter. While it may not have been necessary to retell the Chicago School origin story of the tall building in such detail, as Finstein does in the section titled "The Skyscraper City" in chapter 1, her reminders about the complex interplay of technological advancement, advanced capitalism, and civic reform are welcome. Equally welcome is her discussion of the "automotive city" in the same chapter, which demonstrates the way planners, politicians, and other urban boosters positioned the car as the natural urban successor of the railroad. One of the strengths of Finstein's book is that, even though her introduction gives away the punch line regarding the long-term (in)efficacy of urban elevated highways, she keeps her readers absolutely in the appropriate historical moment, so that we are not judging the planning decisions of the 1920s with the values of the 2020s.

In fact, Finstein's starting point is earlier than the 1920s; in the book's first section (chapters 1 and 2), she reaches back to the 1850s to ground her study in the earliest discussions about urban growth and traffic congestion that gave rise to pragmatic transportation responses like elevated railways, subways, and utopian schemes for multitiered cities that promised to keep everyone in their fast-moving lanes. The three chapters of the "Elevated Expectations" section (part II) present the urban background and early planning for Finstein's case study highways as "Beaux-Arts Chicago," "art deco New York," and "streamlined Boston" come into focus. While Finstein uses these descriptors to foreground design intentionality and aesthetic priorities, they are also a starting point for charting the civic and commercial impulses in each city. Thus, in Chicago the legacy of the Burnham Plan looms large in Wacker Drive's gestation, while in New York, business interests reigned supreme even as they debated the future character of the Hudson River waterfront. When the architectural firm of Sloan and Robertson was finally hired to consult on the design of the West Side Highway, the decision was less an admission of the roadway's visual impact than an attempt to put a modern gloss on the project, literally, through a stone veneer. Finstein spends too much time discussing the decorative programs of a trio of Sloan and Robertson towers—as if to remind readers that she really is writing an architectural history. But when she finally turns her attention to the firm's work on the elevated highway, her earlier analysis of the sidewalk-level embellishment of its deco skyscrapers usefully parallels her discussion of how Sloan and Robertson considered pedestrians underneath the highway as well as drivers atop it. In the Boston chapter,

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there is little discussion of the user's point of view because the Central Artery's protracted development over five decades made such micro-scale issues largely irrelevant. Instead, Finstein concentrates on what happened to the road's design as authority over the project shifted from the city to the state with, eventually, federal regulation.

One frustrating aspect of the book is Finstein's narrative separation of elevated highway planning in Chicago, New York, and Boston from the construction and subsequent use of the highway in each city. Interrupting each history just prior to highway realization in "Elevated Expectations," she defers the "consequences of construction" and "aftershocks" until the book's final section, "Bridges and Divides." This rupture is surely intentional—a deliberate separation of the optimism and fanfare that accompanied roadway planning, when the highways were presented as "redemptive solutions," from the violent upheavals that accompanied demolition and clearance of the routes (chapter 6) and the quotidian headaches of driving on the highways and living/working with them (chapter 7). In each of the last two chapters, Finstein presents the three urban elevated highways in turn, and for readers not sufficiently familiar with all three cities, the book's structure loses the story thread each time Finstein moves from city to city. Nonetheless, this organization will not limit the book's classroom use, since teachers can assign each city chapter along with the corresponding sections of chapters 6 and 7.

Ultimately, because she moves so briskly through construction, mounting traffic congestion, and backlash, Finstein gives short shrift to the lived realities of the urban elevated highways. While she deftly summarizes their infrastructure failures, one wishes for a more nuanced consideration of their social and economic consequences. All three cities reconsidered the impacts of their highways' rending of the urban fabric when, as Finstein puts it, "concern for human scale and livability of American cities began to trump the seductiveness of automobile infrastructure" (208). That statement applies to Chicago, New York, and Boston, at least where Wacker Drive, the West Side Elevated Highway, and the Central Artery are concerned.

Modern Mobility Aloft makes an important contribution to urban, planning, and architectural histories by focusing on the elevated highway as a designed object, and perhaps relic, of the twentieth century's embrace of automobility. But what about other elevated highways in other parts of those cities, in neighborhoods regarded as too peripheral in terms of race and class and hence not yet targeted for the neoliberal replanning that led to the reimagining of Finstein's three case study highways? These are not Finstein's subject. But if her book prompts a new appreciation for an earlier generation of roadways, in which architectural intentions were as significant as the physical impacts on the urban landscape, we might also inquire about the legacy of other elevated highways, ones whose persistence into the twenty-first century suggests that despite climate change and advances in electric and autonomous vehicles, we are still in the throes of the automobile age.

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Note

1. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960); Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway—Superhoax* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York: Viking Press, 1997).

Andrew Demshuk

Cities after Hitler: Redemptive Reconstruction across Cold War Borders

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Andrew Demshuk's *Cities after Hitler* won the 2023 Alice Davis Hitchcock Award from the Society of Architectural Historians. It is an impressive work of scholarship, a lengthy and generously illustrated text well anchored in a rich array of primary and secondary sources. More importantly, it makes a significant and somewhat unusual argument, which is that the postwar reconstructions of three cities that were part of a united Germany from 1871 to 1945 but during the Cold War were located in three different nation-states—the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), and Poland—merit being considered comparatively. Demshuk, a historian, has written previously about postwar expulsions of Germans from land recently acquired by Poland and about the destruction of historic architecture in postwar Leipzig. In this book, he casts what is for architectural historians a refreshingly original light on his subjects, Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, and Wrocław (formerly Breslau), coining the term "redemptive reconstruction" to describe how three different political regimes restored or re-created historic landmarks in order to reimagine the past within what were largely new and often explicitly modern postwar cities. Identifying similarities between the architectures of the two Germanies is not entirely novel, as scholars such as Greg Castillo, Wallis Miller, Simone Hain, and Hartmut Frank have already established that different political systems did not necessarily generate entirely different forms; this conclusion is not surprising considering that the Iron Curtain never entirely cut off awareness between the two German-speaking architectural cultures. What is new is adding into the mix a city that had been largely German-speaking, and certainly controlled by German-speaking regimes, for roughly a millennium before it was ceded to Poland following the defeat of the Third Reich, whereupon it was populated by an almost entirely new citizenry drawn from across Poland. This population included those resettled from Lviv (formerly Lemberg, Lwów, and Lvov), which became part of the Soviet Union and is now in Ukraine.

Also new is such a sustained consideration of any of these cities, as Berlin has dominated most of the previous analysis of the relationship between politics and architecture in postwar Central Europe. This approach is particularly useful because it shifts the focus away from national considerations (although these are never ignored) and toward more local actors, mostly at the municipal level. In all three cities, the architects who staffed municipal planning offices or worked for private clients encountered quite similar issues at the war's end. Wholesale destruction of the built fabric resulting from aerial bombardment, followed by subsequent invasion, left the bulk of the

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