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# Concrete Legacy: The Effects of the Interstate Highway System on Black Communities in the U.S.

*Laurel M. O'Hare*

## Abstract

This article examines the role that racism, racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and classism played in the construction of the Interstate Highway System as a part of 20th-century urban renewal. It will first understand the context of American urban renewal and then look at the policy specific to the Interstate Highway System. After that, I will discuss the resistance many communities portrayed and how bureaucracy stood firm against grassroots organizing. Then, this paper will explore the process of highway removal and new construction, as well as reparations for the communities most affected by the Interstate Highway System. Finally, I will give warnings of possible ramifications that could emerge from highway removal. This article is rooted in the community of Rondo/Old Rondo in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where this paper got its start. The Rondo community was targeted by city planners to be destroyed as the highway rolled in, as were many other Black communities in the United States. Hundreds of homes were damaged, but now, the community, in partnership with the city government, is making plans for repair. I recognize the importance of the Rondo community and the City of Saint Paul to the future of highway-related reparations and this paper specifically. The answer to the question of the most effective way to restore and repair affected communities lies within those very people.

**Keywords:** highways, racism, Interstate Highway System, community, urban renewal, segregation, United States, reparations

## Introduction

In a nation built on the backs of Black slaves, it is nearly impossible to find an American institution that isn't racist to some degree. This exists more obviously in things such as policing, education, and politics, as well as in less-seen things such as public transportation and the very roads many of us drive on. While roads in the United States were initially intended to accommodate the simple invention of the wheel, the extensive network of roads that exists now is the largest in the world. The Interstate Highway System alone is also one of the most significant domestic infrastructure projects in the U.S., and that doesn't even account for 10% of all of the roads in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> These roads are used simply for transportation, but also for the geographical segregation of many cities and towns. When the Interstate Highway System (IHS) was under construction, many roads' pathways went along existing redlines, the invisible lines separating Black and white communities in many cities. In other cases, the highways went directly through the Black communities. Many people and government entities were to blame for these decisions, some of which extended back to the roots of this project, one of which was a wave of urban renewal policy and programs that began in the mid-20th century. Urban renewal sparked suburbanization and other urban changes that altered how the metropolitan functioned. With it, updated infrastructure, including roads, was also promised. There was also a promise of the eradication of urban blight, which was an indirect way to say the poor, Black, or immigrant neighborhoods.

Millions were displaced by infrastructure updates, primarily due to the Interstate Highway System. Unsurprisingly, many of those displaced were Black. Many communities tried to resist; the anti-freeway movement was fitting to the general counterculture of the mid-20th century, though most failed. Today, many of these communities are split in half, cut off from urban centers, or gone altogether because of the IHS. Not only that, but the environmental havoc that the IHS has wreaked was and is extensive. In many cities, highways no longer serve even those they were meant to.

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<sup>1</sup> Trip 2021 Interstate Report Final 6-17-21.  
[https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TRIP\\_Interstate\\_Report\\_June\\_2021.pdf](https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TRIP_Interstate_Report_June_2021.pdf). and "Table HM-16 - Highway Statistics 2017 - Policy: Federal Highway Administration." Table HM-16 - Highway Statistics 2017 - Policy | Federal Highway Administration.  
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2017/hm16.cfm>.

Since the 1970s, cities have been looking for ways to turn away from the highways, including tearing sections of them down altogether. Some have been successful in creating more pedestrian-friendly urban centers, others less so, but nearly none have addressed the damage caused to Black communities. The 21st century, however, is bringing a course of action that may include reparations and solutions to highway removal or restructuring that are more directly aimed toward Black communities. Through an examination of the progression of urban renewal and the Interstate Highway System development, I will present the racism intertwined in the entire process. Then, I will show the current state of highway policy and highlight the possibilities and troubles of the future of redesign and repair programs. I contend that we must center Black and other primarily affected communities in solution-oriented conversation to rewrite the legacy of the Interstate Highway System.

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### **Background & Setting**

In the 1930s, the United States saw a change in many aspects of social and economic culture. Class was reevaluated, labor and education prioritized in policy, and even gender rights were addressed. It seemed only fitting to move away from Jim Crow segregation and face the racism that the nation had been perpetuating for centuries. Disappointingly, the shift in society did not apply much to race. In fact, many institutions were solidifying racism in policy and practice. Federal and local governments withheld rights like voting from Black Americans through policy loopholes. They introduced infrastructure projects that would either intentionally or indifferently reinforce and hold on to racist structures like segregation, just without directly saying so. These projects could be legally justified or stay entirely out of the public eye until they were already in place. Many of these initiatives were concealed under the ruse of urban renewal. Urban renewal is, in part, the process of seizing and demolishing large amounts of both

privately and publicly owned land<sup>2</sup> to modernize and improve aging infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> It was designed to address common urban decay problems such as inadequate transportation or sanitation, obsolete housing, and sociological correlates of urban aging such as crime. Since the 1930s, those lobbying around urban renewal efforts saw themselves as fighting the urban blight “plaguing the core of US cities”<sup>4</sup>. The 1949 Housing Act, the first national Act to address city overcrowding and urban blight, broke ground for contemporary urban renewal in New York City. It opened the floodgates for the promise that new and improved housing, freeways, medical centers, commercial skyscrapers, and more would bring new life to cities where urban decay occurred. A romantic view of urban renewal would assume positive outcomes for all: brighter and shinier cities with many amenities accessible to all residents. Disappointingly, this era of urban renewal laid the groundwork for the eventual tidal wave of human displacement and decentralization of urban life.

Urbanism was getting a facelift, and prominent city planner and former New York Secretary of State Robert Moses led the way. Moses championed a new scale of thinking about urbanization. He pushed for housing subsidies, debt-financed highways and infrastructural transformations, and other processes that rearranged metropolitan living. Through this, suburbanization developed. He also pushed rhetoric like “clear the slums,” saying that “we can’t let minorities dictate that this century-old chore will be put off another generation or finally abandoned.”<sup>5</sup> He was also a significant player in constructing central New York City highways, nearly all justified through his master plans for urban renewal and slum clearing. Moses completed these projects under racial capitalism and seemed well aware of his doings.

Geographer and author David Harvey spoke to the influence of Moses and suburbanization of the US not as merely a new infrastructure but rather a radical

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<sup>2</sup> “Urban Renewal.” Encyclopædia Britannica, November 5, 2023.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-renewal>.

<sup>3</sup> “Urban Renewal.” The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook, September 30, 2021.

<https://inclusivehistorian.com/urban-renewal/>.

<sup>4</sup> Tucker-Abramson, Myka. “Shock Therapy: Atlas Shrugged, Urban Renewal, and the Making of the Entrepreneurial Subject.” In *Novel Shocks: Urban Renewal and the Origins of Neoliberalism*, 1st ed., 84–103. Fordham University Press, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv75d9p6.7>.

<sup>5</sup> Evans, Farrell. “How Interstate Highways Guttled Communities-and Reinforced Segregation.” History.com, September 21, 2023.

<https://www.history.com/news/interstate-highway-system-infrastructure-construction-segregation>.

transformation in lifestyle and produced an entirely new way of life where commodities like refrigerators and air conditioners, two cars in the driveway, and newly built housing all played a part in the absorption of surplus<sup>6</sup>. Suburbanization, or new urbanism, strengthened capitalism, nurtured neoliberalist values, including decentralization and privatization<sup>7</sup>, and built a picturesque way of living for white people.

Because of ongoing racial covenants<sup>8</sup>, low-interest loans, and longstanding racialized class divides, these opportunities were only made available for middle/upper-middle-class white families. Urbanization has always been capitalistic and class-based since surpluses are usually taken from oppressed people and places. In contrast, the disbursement of these surpluses is still controlled by those at the very top. White bourgeois utopias and their manicured lawns and bland politics acted as agents of decentralization and devolved deregulation, promoting a materialistic, selfish, and exclusive style of life that aligned with neoliberal ideas. Capitalism and neoliberalism crossed to create a climate where suburbanization thrives, at least for those who are white and middle to upper-class.

The displacement process- “accumulation by dispossession”- lies at the core of urban development under capitalism. The capture of high-value land from low-income, often Black populations implicates urbanization as a class-based, capitalistic phenomenon that promotes suburbanization under neoliberalism. Human displacement came in two forms, one for white middle-class families and the other for the low-income Black communities. The federal government incentivized white families to move into the suburban metropolitan areas through plans such as housing subsidization. At the same time, Black communities were addressed with forceful removal through construction projects and land dispossession by the government’s use of eminent domain. The privilege of choosing to partake in the capitalist process of suburbanization was reserved for the middle-class white population, ultimately preserving their lives, homes,

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<sup>6</sup> Harvey, David. "The Right to the City" In *The City between Freedom and Security: Contested Public Spaces in the 21st Century* edited by Deane Simpson, Vibeke Jensen and Anders Rubing, 156-171. Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035607611-014>

<sup>7</sup> Peck, Jamie. "Neoliberal Suburbanism: Frontier Space." *Urban Geography* 32, no. 6 (2011): 884–919. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.32.6.884>.

<sup>8</sup> *Racial covenants are clauses inserted into property deeds to prevent non-White people from buying or renting land* ("What is a Covenant?". Mapping Prejudice, University of Minnesota Libraries. <https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu/racial-covenants/what-is-a-covenant#:~:text=Racial%20covenants%20are%20clauses%20that,from%20buying%20or%20occupying%20land.>)

economies, and souls. Black communities across the country crumbled under the rise of the 19th century-like neoliberal ethic of acute possessive individualism. Whitney N. Laster Pirtle, PhD researcher at the University of California Merced, cites authors Andy Clarno<sup>9</sup> and Walter Johnson<sup>10</sup> in saying, “Racially minoritized and economically deprived groups face capitalist and racist systems that continue to devalue and harm their lives, even within newer, supposedly deracialized neoliberal agendas.”<sup>11</sup> Prominent American professor and author Cedric Robinson emphasizes in his book, “Black Marxism,” the idea that racialized exploitation and capitalism are mutually constitutive, supporting the point made by Pirtle, Clarno, and Johnson. Urban renewal cannot have been a racially blind process if this is true, as capitalism drove urban redevelopment and all of the social changes that came with that, including suburbanization.

Suburbanization provided white people a way into the periphery of new infrastructure projects, ones that would demolish the “blighted” areas, the slums. Government urban renewal policies gained traction with the public due to the public perspective of slums, primarily Black and poor neighborhoods, and also by the overwhelmingly optimistic views of new infrastructure from the government. One of the infrastructure initiatives was the Interstate Highway System. Robert Moses argued alongside other influential urban planners that the interstate highway system would provide an opportunity to clear out central-city slums and rebuild metropolitan structures according to “modern standards”<sup>12</sup>. This part of the larger urban renewal project was advertised as encouraging safer and more efficient travel, allegedly developed to benefit everyone. To many, the community consequences of the highway project outweighed whatever travel benefits were supposed to come of it, but not to bureaucratic entities. It was almost two birds, one stone for the government: clearing slums and ridding of urban blight while building new infrastructure nationwide. Engineers and governments built the freeways through Black communities partially to reinforce the waning

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<sup>9</sup> Clarno, Andy. *Neoliberal Apartheid: Palestine/Israel and South Africa after 1994*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226430126>

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Walter, and Robin DG Kelley, eds. *Race capitalism justice*. Vol. 1. MIT Press, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Laster Pirtle, Whitney N. “Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States.” *Health Education & Behavior* 47, no. 4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120922942>.

<sup>12</sup> Muhl, Raymond A. “Stop the Road.” *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 5 (2004): 674–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144204265180>.

segregationist identity of much of the country and advance the interests of white residents and partially because the monetary value of the land was so low. The construction both symbolically and physically reinforced racist policy without explicitly calling it so<sup>13</sup>. Urban renewal was a gateway for a new wave of structural racist policies and projects.

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### **Policy, Plans, & Resistance**

This wasn't to say there weren't legitimate grounds for many urban renewal initiatives. The need for a modern iteration of interstate travel infrastructure was eminent- the automobile industry was growing, the post-war sense of national security was low, and mass geographical change was occurring over the entire country. The first wave of road improvement efforts took shape when the bicycle was invented. In the 1890s, the National League for Good Roads and the League of American Wheelmen built the Good Roads Movement. It was not until 1916 when the Federal Aid Road Act was established to improve rural post roads, the first step for using federal aid and direction for modern road construction. In 1921, a new act extended funding for motorists, and in 1932, President Herbert Hoover enacted the penny per gallon tax, the first federal gas tax. The federal government's motor initiatives of the time drew more attention to interstate travel in the United States. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 called for a fuller national system of highways, but not until the act took on its 1956 iteration was the project fully funded<sup>14</sup>. Just 15 years prior, in 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed that three north-south and three east-west highways would be sufficient<sup>15</sup>. Today, there are 70 Interstate Highways, an increase of over 1,000%. This

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<sup>13</sup> Archer, Deborah N. "Transportation Policy and the Underdevelopment of Black Communities \*." *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law* 30, no. 2 (2021): 253-279. <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/transportation-policy-underdevelopment-black/docview/2584567235/se-2>.

<sup>14</sup> "Beyond Traffic 2045." US Department of Transportation, 2017. [https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/docs/BeyondTraffic\\_tagged\\_508\\_final.pdf](https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/docs/BeyondTraffic_tagged_508_final.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Weingroff, Richard F. "Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating The Interstate System." *Public Roads* 60, no. 1 (Summer 1996).



growth can be attributed to the nation's 34th president, Dwight Eisenhower, and the “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways,” now known simply as the Interstate Highway System, was constructed.

Eisenhower brought his own personal history and interest in highway infrastructure into his presidency. He first recognized the importance of such a transportation system in 1919, when then-Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower participated in the U.S. Army’s first transcontinental motor convoy from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco. As a part of this convoy, he saw the hardships of such cross-country travel. His eventual experience in Germany during World War II further built his passion for an advanced system of transcontinental highways. He saw the advantages the Germans employed because of their autobahn<sup>16</sup> network and believed it could provide the United States with a similar defense advantage. At the beginning of the Cold War era, when the country was on edge about national defense<sup>17</sup>, this seemed like a perfectly logical project to pursue.

Thus, the President’s Advisory Committee on the National Highway System (NHS), headed by Lieutenant General Lucius Clay (the “Clay Committee”), produced a report to Congress on the National Highway Program. The Clay Committee detailed four primary points in their report that supported the NHS: automotive travel safety, conditions of roads, national security, and sustained health of the economy<sup>18</sup>. Automotive travel was increasing quickly, and so were related fatalities. At the time, there was an average of 36,000 traffic fatalities per year, not only a massive loss of life but carrying a multibillion-dollar effect on the economy. Road conditions were racking up the costs of vehicle ownership and the overall cost of transportation. On national security, the country was facing a pervasive threat of nuclear attack, and the call to increase road travel would be preventative to any emergency evacuation situation. The Department of Defense (D.O.D.) initially headed the NHS because of the high tension

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<sup>16</sup> *The Autobahn is the federal controlled-access highway system in Germany* (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Autobahn." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 15, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/Autobahn-German-highway>)

<sup>17</sup> Lacy, Lee. “Dwight D. Eisenhower and the birth of the Interstate Highway System.” US Army, February 20, 2018 [https://www.army.mil/article/198095/dwight\\_d\\_eisenhower\\_and\\_the\\_birth\\_of\\_the\\_interstate\\_highway\\_system](https://www.army.mil/article/198095/dwight_d_eisenhower_and_the_birth_of_the_interstate_highway_system).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

the Cold War held in the public. The cabinet-level Department of Transportation was only established in the mid-1960s due to the processes of the Interstate Highway system<sup>19</sup>. Finally, the interstate highway system would keep transportation at pace with the increasing population, and the public saw it to be an efficient use of the subsequent raising of taxes.

However, to end there would disregard the immense racism interwoven into the planning process. While racial capitalism and neoliberalism informed suburbanization and urban redevelopment, specific ramifications of those manifested in the highway infrastructure development. To begin, the use of eminent domain by the government to seize the land for the highway to sit on was more than implicitly racial. Geographic areas, often called African-American cultural enterprise zones, were economically robust. Still, the government and planners saw the opposite, marking much of the land occupied by Black people as low value. It was relatively easy to deploy eminent domain on those properties because they could argue that the government could put the land to better use for the larger public good, and it wasn't incredibly costly either. This resulted in the widespread displacement of people who were most often Black or Brown and of low socioeconomic status. Urban planners, engineers, and local governments explicitly warned about this in a conference convened by the Highway Research Board in 1958 when they said that members of those non-white and low-income communities were facing the "greatest potential injury" from the displacement caused by the Interstate Highway System<sup>20</sup>. Other urban planners warned of similar things- that displacement would disproportionately affect the large Black areas of the cities where the housing supply is already inadequate and relocation beyond the neighborhood confines was minimal because of the geographic boundaries set by racially driven housing policies<sup>21</sup>. It didn't help that the public view of those Black city areas was not positive by any means, going beyond the scope of urban blight and conjecturing that Black

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<sup>19</sup> Ryan, Lee Ann. "Urban Freeway Removal: Building a Case for the Re-Purposing of I-5 through Downtown Seattle." *University of Washington*, 2018, 27-40.

<sup>20</sup> Reft, Ryan. "We mythologize highways, but they've damaged communities of color." *The Washington Post*, January 19, 2023.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2023/01/19/interstate-highways-black-neighborhoods/>.

<sup>21</sup> Mohl "Stop the Road", 2004.

neighborhoods were merely organs that were diseased and needed to be excised<sup>22</sup>. Highway planners, city leaders, and state and federal governing bodies leveraged that rhetoric in their strategic planning of the highways. Perhaps if we were to think of these neighborhoods as large tapestries hanging on a wall- highway planners traced a line down the middle of the great fabric as if to sketch the path of an interstate. They then slashed along it, tearing apart the tapestry right down the center- communities cut in half. This is what happened across the United States, in the hearts of many urban Black and other non-white neighborhoods as interstates tore through cities. In Syracuse, New York, plans for I-81 included a direct path through the 15th Ward, the neighborhood home to 90% of the city's Black population<sup>23</sup>. They weren't alone.

In 1969, Nashville civic officials deliberately curved I-40 to avoid a white community. Highway planners in Birmingham, Alabama, did the same thing when planning the path of Interstate 59<sup>24</sup>. Consequently, entire communities were leveled; Saint Paul saw its Rondo neighborhood torn in half by the Interstate Highway System, L.A.'s Sugar Hill, Syracuse its 15th ward, and more, all facing the grim reality that was a new wave of segregation. This didn't unfold without resistance, though. Freeway revolts erupted nationwide as plans for these new infrastructure projects materialized. Starting in San Francisco in 1959, a wave of revolts worked from coast to coast. They were fighting the "concrete monsters" that were rolling through cities. Freeway fighters in Washington, D.C., birthed the slogan "No more white men's roads through Black men's homes." This added to the powerful anti-highway rhetoric that citizen armies used to bring attention to the unfolding highway plans. Author and professor Raymond A. Mohl says, "The highway revolt is against the tyranny of the machine- the highway bulldozer and the political machine behind it." This quote reflects the framework of the resistance.

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<sup>22</sup> Menezes, Ryan. "4 Ways US Highways Were Designed To Screw Over Black Americans." Cracked.com, May 7, 2021. [https://www.cracked.com/article\\_30222\\_4-ways-us-highways-were-designed-to-screw-over-black-americans](https://www.cracked.com/article_30222_4-ways-us-highways-were-designed-to-screw-over-black-americans).

<sup>23</sup> Fernandez, Jay A. "Racism by Design: The Building of Interstate 81." American Civil Liberties Union, August 10, 2023. <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/racism-by-design-the-building-of-interstate-81>.

<sup>24</sup> Dillon, Liam and Poston, Ben. "A TIMES INVESTIGATION; Freeways Forcing Out Residents of Color -- again; U.S. Interstate Highway System is One of the Nation's Greatest Public Works Projects, but it's Come at an Enormous Social Cost." *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 14, 2021. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/times-investigation-freeways-forcing-out/docview/2597054801/se-2>.

In addition, civil rights activism coincided with the freeway revolts occurring in many cities. Many argued that the projects infringed on their civil rights and built political coalitions, brought cases to courts, and collaborated with other cities to strengthen their resistance.

However, this wasn't enough to stop the bulldozers and road rollers plowing through cities<sup>25</sup>. Black communities didn't have much political leverage, and even though the courts gave some cases attention, they rarely ever came out in favor of a Black community. Nearly always, the communities that were successful in their lobbying for the diversion of highway construction were white. In contrast, Black community grassroots groups often came up short against the inflexible bureaucratic forces of state and federal highway engineers and administrators<sup>26</sup>. Partly, this was a demonstration of power- white bureaucrats weren't going to concede to Black neighborhood protesters. But mostly, it was a reinforcement of geographical, economic, and social racism into the new structure of cities. 19th United States Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg says there is racism "physically built" into our highways. The IHS today stands as a physical reminder of our racialized norms and values as a society, where white space and privilege are protected at the expense of Black communities<sup>27</sup>.

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## Outcomes & Looking Forward

By the late 1960s, highway construction demolished over 62,000 housing units annually. Ultimately, half a million houses were swapped with 41,000 miles of interstate across the United States. Black neighborhoods were the ones affected- steamrolled

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<sup>25</sup>Mohl "Stop the Road", 2004

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Dillon, Liam and Poston, Ben. "The racist history of America's interstate highway boom." *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2021.

<https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2021-11-11/the-racist-history-of-americas-interstate-highway-boom>.

without any efforts to remediate the damage<sup>28</sup>. The government “bulldozed and replaced [Black communities] with ribbons of asphalt and concrete”<sup>29</sup>.

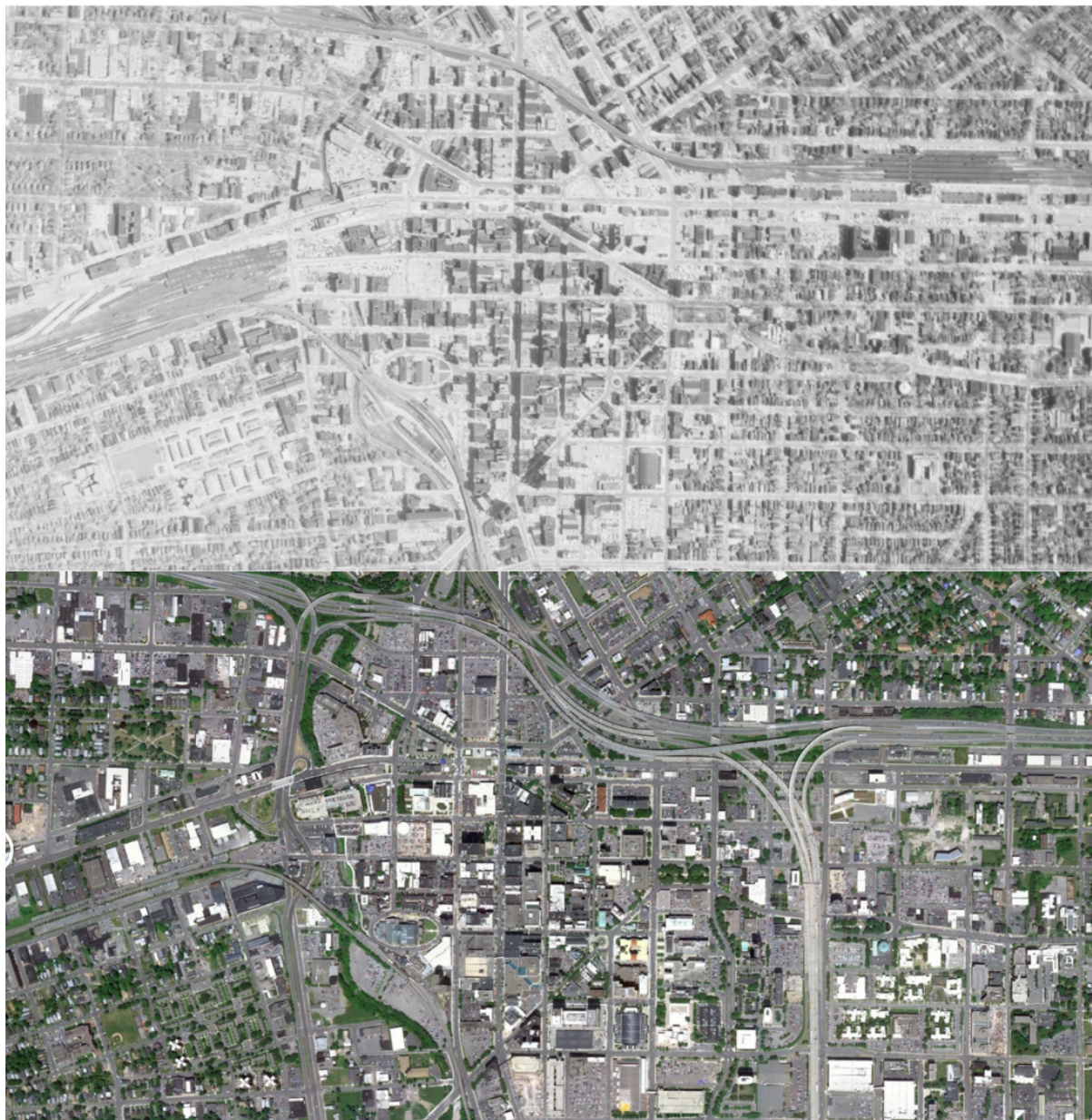


Figure 1. Syracuse before and after the Interstate Highway construction, 1956-2011.

(Photographs obtained from Shane Hampton, “60 Years of Urban Change”, 2015).

In Syracuse, New York, over 1,300 families were displaced<sup>30</sup>. Saint Paul, Minnesota—there were 600 homes were demolished, centralized in what was the city’s primary

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<sup>28</sup> Department of Transportation, “Beyond Traffic 2045”

<sup>29</sup> Dillon and Poston, “Freeways Forcing Out Residents of Color”, 2021

<sup>30</sup> Fernandez, “Racism by Design”, 2023

Black community<sup>31</sup>. Even in Baltimore, where the interstate project never materialized, the core Black neighborhood was prematurely demolished. When they didn't go through, they went around, running along the redlining bounds that divided Black and white neighborhoods to cling on to an era of segregation that seemed to be pulling to a halt. Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx recalls his hometown in an interview with the Washington Post and how the highway (I-485) in Charlotte, North Carolina, acted as a wall, isolating the Black community from the rest of the city. In 21st-century New York City, residents call the Staten Island Expressway (I-287) the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, over 1 million people across the United States lost their homes solely due to the Interstate Highway System project. Between the highway project and urban renewal as a whole, two-thirds of those displaced were African-American<sup>33</sup>. This fact is no accident. As stated, nearly all of the projects had racism explicitly at their core. Urban renewal and the development of the Interstate Highway System were and are detrimental to the greater Black community in the U.S. One of the primary ways this manifests today is in the overall wealth of many Black communities. Home and property ownership is one of the most significant forms of wealth in the United States today, and the differences in rates of that ownership by race exemplify the overall racial wealth gap in the United States, of which they are both related and reliant<sup>34</sup>. In 2022, the racial homeownership gap was 30%, favoring the white population. Today's trends match those of 50 years ago- the 1970 white-Black homeownership gap is the same as in 2020<sup>35</sup>. This demonstrates how difficult it is to recover from inequities, how wealth

<sup>31</sup> "Libguides: Rondo Neighborhood & I-94: Overview." Overview - Rondo Neighborhood & I-94 - LibGuides at Minnesota Historical Society Library, n.d. <https://libguides.mnhs.org/rondo>.

<sup>32</sup> Halsey, Ashley. "On a Mission to Redirect Nation's Highway Legacy." *The Washington Post*, Mar 29, 2016.

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/on-mission-redirect-nations-highway-legacy/docview/1776251197/se-2>.

<sup>33</sup> African-American in this case refers to the same population as has been described as Black, but the source uses the wording "African-American" and this reference reflects that.

<sup>34</sup> Markley, Scott N., Taylor J. Hafley, Coleman A. Allums, Steven R. Holloway, and Hee Cheol Chung. "The Limits of Homeownership: Racial Capitalism, Black Wealth, and the Appreciation Gap in Atlanta." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 44, no. 2 (2020): 310–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12873>.

<sup>35</sup> Racial Differences in Economic Security: Housing." U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2022.

<https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/racial-differences-in-economic-security-housing#:~:text=The%20benefits%20from%20homeownership%20have,households%20of%20any%20other%20race>.

building has only been offered to specific populations, and how it has been actively destroyed for others. It is estimated that Saint Paul's Black community, Rondo, lost about \$157 million in today's money of generational wealth with the construction of the IHS<sup>36</sup>. This was not only seen in Saint Paul either. Black communities in Atlanta, Miami, Baltimore, and many other cities saw comparable financial damages. The Interstate Highway System is a measure that the United States government used to continue financial oppression for Black communities and maintain exclusive economic mobility for white people.

This process didn't end with the official declaration of completion of the IHS in 1992<sup>37</sup>. Just a year prior, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) was signed into law to regionalize transportation policy and funding, expand the Interstate Highway system by adding new corridors, and authorize federal highway grants. ISTEA approved \$124 billion for highway grants over six years, marking a new era of highway priorities and policies<sup>38</sup>. Between 1993 and 2017, around 30,000 miles of freeway were added, including lane expansions<sup>39</sup>. In many cities, this is still occurring. Cities are proposing highway widening projects and adding new stretches of interstate, but there's something else happening, too. Cities all over the country are reevaluating highways, their effects on communities and the environment now, and the damages done to historical populations along the construction process. These projects look different in every city, some involving land developments, others a form of reparations, and some proposing both. Many of these projects have a lot of promise to reconnect communities and restore land and economies successfully. Part of the ISTEA funding is allocated towards environmental preservation efforts such as scenic preservation and

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<sup>36</sup> Sepic, Matt. "First Rondo Descendent Buys Home Using St. Paul's Inheritance Fund." MPR News, September 15, 2023.  
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/09/14/first-rondo-descendent-buys-home-using-st-pauls-inheritance-fund>.

<sup>37</sup> Witcher, T.R. "History Lesson: The Last Piece of the Interstate Highway System May Have Been the Toughest." ASCE American Society of Civil Engineers, n.d.  
<https://www.asce.org/publications-and-news/civil-engineering-source/civil-engineering-magazine/issues/magazine-issue/article/2021/03/the-last-piece-of-the-interstate-highway-system-may-have-been-the-toughest>.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan, "Urban Freeway Removal", 2018

<sup>39</sup> Dillon and Poston, "Freeways Forcing Out Residents of Color", 2021

clean air standards, and another part to urban mass transit purposes, showing the diversity of this era of highway and transportation policy and priority<sup>40</sup>.

A project to tear down the Interstate 81 viaduct in Syracuse, New York, is underway. Instead, a pedestrian-friendly street grid will stand<sup>41</sup>. The state will fund this project alongside the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods federal grant program by the U.S. Department of Transportation. This fund produces three grant types: Capital Construction grants, Community Planning grants, and Regional Partnerships Challenge grants. As described by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), each fund has its associated objectives and funding amounts<sup>42</sup>. Syracuse is one of the many cities looking to utilize this program.

The U.S. DOT awarded Saint Paul, Minnesota, a \$2 million grant to fund a similar project of their own addressing the impact of the Interstate 94 construction on their respective Black community, Rondo. Nonprofit organization ReConnect Rondo has worked with engineers and city and state officials to create a plan for a land bridge project. This endeavor would entail a 20-acre cap over a stretch of I-94 where the thriving Rondo neighborhood used to sit. It would be bike and foot-traffic-friendly and even relink some of the original street network of Old Rondo<sup>43</sup>.

Prospects like these all sound promising, but with any endeavor of this scale, there are serious concerns. While the Syracuse project is partially being done to correct some of the damages done to the Black neighborhood, it also puts that same population at risk for further complications. Establishing a new business and social district and eradicating a highway will inevitably raise land value. With that comes a rise in the cost of living, including renting and property prices, catalyzing a new process of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, Kea. "Syracuse's Messy I-81 Teardown Fight Shows The Challenge of 'Reconnecting Communities.'" Streetsblog USA, June 16, 2023. <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2022/12/12/syracuses-messy-i-81-teardown-fight-shows-the-challenge-of-reconnecting-communities>. and "Ground Officially Broken on the Transformational I-81 Viaduct Project." *City of Syracuse*, July 21, 2023. City of Syracuse. <https://www.syr.gov/News/City-News/2023-07-21-Mayors-Office-News>.

<sup>42</sup> "Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program." U.S. Department of Transportation, n.d. <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/rcnprogram>.

<sup>43</sup> Stokes, Kyle. "Reconnect Rondo Leader: No, a Land Bridge over I-94 Wouldn't Be Too Expensive." MinnPost, March 1, 2023. <https://www.minnpost.com/metro/2023/03/reconnect-rondo-leader-no-a-land-bridge-over-i-94-wouldnt-be-too-expensive-to-build/>.



gentrification. The I-94 project in Minnesota is expected to impact land value and tax revenue for property taken for freeway construction at about \$655 million, a staggering amount<sup>44</sup>. Cities are concerned that projects like these could have an adverse effect on their populations. Just as the original construction caused mass human displacement, the gentrification associated with the new construction projects has the potential to do that as well. Anti-displacement efforts that cities are looking to include securing the community's land through land trusts or nonprofit organizations. This would be positive, but it's not the only concern. Communities are also concerned about the potential damages to the current economies structured around the highways- hotels, restaurants, gas stations, etc. Many communities have become economically reliant on the highway, and there is a considerable risk of getting rid of the commercial structure of the neighborhood as happened with the initial construction<sup>45</sup>.

There is no one way to restore communities and neighborhoods where highways once stood. There are a few examples of cities where construction to remove, replace, or redesign stretches of highway. These projects are primarily undertaken to make areas pedestrian-friendly, replace aging infrastructure, or remove environmental hazards. Mostly, though, they are to promote human-centered cities. Some early examples include Chattanooga, Tennessee, where the city tore down the Riverfront Parkway due to changing local economic and social conditions, and the needs of the area had changed. In 2004, a boulevard replaced the stretch of the freeway, adding visual pleasure to the city and creating a new, socioeconomically stable downtown Chattanooga<sup>46</sup>. Rochester, New York, provides another semi-success story, where a 2013 project developed into a highway-less community with a thriving small-business scene and is plenty bike- and walkable<sup>47</sup>. On the flip side, areas like Boston found themselves draining through money for little to no improvement and even the onset of new problems. The "Big Dig," a project on Boston's Central Artery, faced a cost jump

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<sup>44</sup> McCormick, Kathleen. "How Urban Highway Removal Is Changing Our Cities." Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, April 14, 2020. <https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/articles/2020-03-deconstruction-ahead-urban-highway-removal-changing-cities>.

<sup>45</sup> Zarroli, Jim. "Why It's So Hard to Tear down a Crumbling Highway Nearly Everyone Hates." The New York Times, June 3, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/03/nyregion/syracuse-interstate-81.html>.

<sup>46</sup> "Model Cities: Chattanooga, Riverfront Parkway." Congress for the New Urbanism, February 14, 2020. <https://www.cnu.org/highways-boulevards/model-cities/chattanooga>.

<sup>47</sup> McCormick, "How Urban Highway Removal is Changing our Cities", 2020

from an estimated \$2.6 billion to \$14 billion<sup>48</sup>. Shoving all their highways underground seemed promising, but the infrastructure began crumbling before it was fully completed, and there were still lingering visual impairments. It did, however, reconnect Boston's North End to the rest of the city and allowed for new public spaces in the urban center<sup>49</sup>.

Just as quickly as construction on the highway system began, it met its demise. Projects such as boulevards and tunnel systems can be successful, as seen in early projects, but every city has a different history, geographical structure, highway, and population. This makes repair and restoration tricky- the communities and the greater nation look and function so differently that there cannot simply be a "reversal" of the construction. Many of these construction projects do not directly address racial equity. To best serve the communities affected, involving communities or even supporting neighborhood initiatives for these projects may be the most potent solution. The answer to the question of the most effective way to restore and repair affected communities lies within those very people.

Cities are not only looking to change the structure of highways physically. Many are also searching for ways to repair damages done to Black and other communities of color along specific corridors of the IHS. "'Sorry' isn't enough..." said Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter at the 2022 August St. Paul Budget Address. Here, Carter detailed a plan for housing reparations for the Rondo community. As of January 11, 2023, the Saint Paul Housing Authority green-lighted an objective called the Inheritance Fund. The Inheritance Fund aims to address financial restoration in the areas that faced upheaval and displacement with the construction of I-94<sup>50</sup>. This program would give descendants of the Rondo neighborhood, the primary Black area of the city, financial assistance with homeownership to restore wealth to the community. Generational wealth is accumulated wealth passed down within a family or community, a significant contributor to overall wealth in the U.S., especially for communities where it is systemically harder to build wealth. Ideally, the Inheritance Fund project would kickstart a new generation of wealth

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<sup>48</sup> Jason H. Peterson, "The Big Dig Disaster: Was Design-Build the Answer," *Suffolk University Law Review* 40, no. 4 (2007): 909-930

<sup>49</sup> Mohl, Raymond A. "The Expressway Teardown Movement in American Cities." *Journal of Planning History* 11, no. 1 (2011): 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513211426028>.

<sup>50</sup> Sepic "First Rondo Descendant Buys Home", 2023 and "Inheritance Fund." Saint Paul Minnesota, n.d. <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/planning-and-economic-development/housing/inheritance-fund>.

building. Santa Monica established the Right to Return program in 2022, with objectives similar to Saint Paul's Inheritance Fund, addressing the damages done to those in the Pico and Belmar Triangle neighborhoods, which were plowed down with the construction of I-10. The primary issue with these programs lies in the capacity of them. One hundred thirty-four families applied for the program in Santa Monica- the city approved 11<sup>51</sup>. Any progress is good, but this does not come close to matching the damages done to this community and many others. Reparations are a tricky task, but not one to give up on, whether that be through homeownership assistance or something else. They need to go hand-in-hand with revitalization construction programs in order to best restore life and wealth to both the land and the community and the people who lost it all the first time around.

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## Conclusion

The federal government created the United States Interstate Highway System under the racially capitalist urban renewal movement in the mid-20th century. Major urbanists and government players, including former New York Secretary of State Robert Moses, pushed for the revitalization of urban cores as a way to rid cities of blight or poor and Black neighborhoods. As the 34th President of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower faced the new Interstate Highway System, and planners like Moses looked to leverage that in their own plans for slum clearing and urban renewal. While Eisenhower's main goals were national security and defense, his cabinet and the other State and city government entities involved took it in their own directions, deliberately selecting areas of their cities where poor and Black populations occupied. Thriving Black neighborhoods were destroyed as a result of this and would make up two-thirds of

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<sup>51</sup> Quintana, Dolores. "Santa Monica's Right to Return Pilot Program Approves 11 Families for Below-Market Housing." Santa Monica Mirror, April 7, 2023. <https://smmirror.com/2023/04/santa-monicas-right-to-return-pilot-program-approves-11-families-for-below-market-housing/#:~:text=The%20City%20of%20Santa%20Monica's,Below%20Market%20Rate%20Housing%20waitlist.>

the 1 million people that were displaced as a result of the IHS. Efforts of resistance were present, though highly unsuccessful due to Black people's lack of political mobility at the time. White resistance efforts, however, frequently succeeded and ended up placing the potential damages to their communities right onto the neighboring Black communities.

The construction of the IHS ripped out the hearts of most major cities' Black communities, and there is factually no way to undo those damages. However, there is always potential for reparations and the creation of projects to restore previously vibrant communities. Since as early as the 1970s, cities have looked to remove highways and replace them with pedestrian-friendly boulevards and community grids. While few directly address the damaged communities, and even fewer use that as a primary goal, it is beginning to occur. Community groups are behind Saint Paul's I-94 construction project because of the community wealth it could restore. In addition to making the area more pedestrian-friendly, it is looking to reunite the Old Rondo community that was quite literally severed in half by the interstate. It is essential to consider potential damages, as is being done in Syracuse, where many residents are concerned about an onset of gentrification and a complete wash of the 15th Ward community yet again. Connecting with the communities to figure out the plans that best serve them will be critical in all of the projects moving forward to prevent another round of national harm to Black communities due to the Interstate Highway System- even if it is the removal of it.

There is no question that something must be done to address the decades-long damages that Black communities face as a result of the Interstate Highway System. Those communities won't be the only ones benefiting, either. A national surge of pedestrian-friendly cities may come, and public transportation may be prioritized in a way that has yet to exist in such a car-centric country. The IHS now holds a legacy of the largest national infrastructure project that balanced harm and benefit like few others. This web of concrete and asphalt that cuts through cities, plains, and mountains alike stands as a reminder of not only innovation but also of destruction and racism. The current administration recognizes this, stating that the federal government is responsible for damages to communities and land nationwide. It is now in their hands to sort out reparations.

President Joe Biden and Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttiegeg call out the racism in constructing the IHS and seemingly understand the importance of new projects<sup>52</sup>. The Restoring Neighborhoods and Strengthening Communities Program, sometimes called the “Highways to Boulevards” program, provides funds to cities looking to redesign sections of interstates into boulevards or the like. As stated, there are dangers with projects like these, so it will be crucial to include anti-displacement policies in every single one. Wealth restoration programs such as the Inheritance Fund of Saint Paul can be utilized to accompany construction efforts to provide the most sound structural base for community rebuilding.

Listening to communities will be the best strategy, as it was precisely what was missing during the initial process of creating the IHS. Understanding the individual needs of each city and prioritizing damaged communities will also contribute to a genuinely successful process. Just as easy as it was for planners to both purposefully and ignorantly uproot hundreds of thousands of Black people, it is equally as challenging to move forward. The legacy of the Interstate Highway System can still be changed for the better; it is concrete, but its legacy does not have to be.

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<sup>52</sup> Wilson, Kea. “Biden Decries US Dot’s Destruction of Black Communities - But Will His Administration Make Reparations?” Streetsblog USA, May 31, 2023. <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2021/01/28/biden-decries-us-dots-destruction-of-black-communities-but-will-his-administration-make-reparations>.

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