

# NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

## Tear it Down!

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Milwaukee is about to do something that might seem astounding, perhaps even un-American: tear down a superhighway. Forty years ago, highway designers planned to surround the central business district with an expressway that was to include a section along the shore of Lake Michigan. This section, which would have separated downtown from its waterfront, generated enough opposition to stop its construction. But more than half of the loop was built, including a half-mile stretch that separates the north side from the rest of downtown.

The elevated road blocks what would otherwise be beautiful views on both sides of the Milwaukee River and property values near the structure are depressed. In contrast, downtown Milwaukee is experiencing a housing boom that has developers searching for sites. In 1999, the county, state and city agreed to remove most of the Park East Freeway and develop the land. The estimated property value increase is \$250 million.

It may seem strange, tearing down expressways after 50 years of the greatest road-building binge in world history. But traffic engineers are learning that urban street grids can distribute urban traffic more efficiently than do superhighways. Orlando-based traffic engineer Walter Kulash argues that "Widening roads to solve traffic congestion is like loosening your belt to cure obesity," and advocates for more smaller streets and roads rather than huge limited-access interstate highways. Traffic engineer Rick Chellman's research in Portsmouth, NH, demonstrates that the urban street grid generates less than half the car trips of suburban development.

In eliminating a segment of superhighway, Milwaukee is not alone. When the 1989 earthquake damaged the Embarcadero Freeway in San Francisco, it was considered an "act of God." San Francisco's political culture embraced a divine message and the city petitioned the state to remove the freeway instead of rebuilding it. The state agreed; nearby property values shot up by more than 300 percent, and views of San Francisco Bay from the North Coast are no longer obstructed.

In the 1970s the mayor of Portland led an effort to remove an elevated expressway separating its downtown from the banks of the Willamette River and replace it with an avenue and a park. Property values are up dramatically, and the park is one of the most popular gathering spots in Oregon. Similarly, in the 1980s New York City removed the Westside Highway and has since enjoyed huge development in the old freeway corridor.

We're changing our attitudes about highways and transportation. San Francisco, Portland, New York, and now Milwaukee all are deconstructing freeways and replacing them with avenues and boulevards.

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