

# Unbuilt

**To fully grasp the significance** of a 40-year-old decision to stop highway expansion through Greater Boston, it helps to engage in a bit of alternative history. So let us imagine: What if that ensnaring spider web of new highways *had* been built?

Thirty-eight-hundred homes would have been demolished. Frederick Law Olmsted's Back Bay Fens would have been sliced in half, between the Museum of Fine Arts and the Gardner Museum. Huge swaths of Central Square and Cambridgeport—the nightclubs, bookstores, and coffeehouses—would have been razed.

In their place would have been an eight-lane interstate beltway some 7.3 miles long, according to most plans, with 13 new interchanges; 12-foot emergency shoulders on both sides; and all the noise, grime, and pollution that comes with 55,000 car trips per day.

This is not to mention the long finger of I-95 that would have extended from Dedham north through the city, or the extension of Route 2 into Cambridge. Does anyone think the South End would be one of the most desirable addresses on the East Coast today with a six-lane highway running through it? Or that Kendall Square would be a teeming catalyst for innovation had the Red Line not been extended?

The 1972 decision by then-governor Francis Sargent to halt the highways was visionary not just because it prevented our famously walkable streets from becoming autobahns. It also marked a comprehensive rethink of transportation policy with a shift—in strategy and resources—toward more sustainable public modes of travel.

The comprehensive three-year review that led to Sargent's decision opened a new lens on transportation planning. Beyond vehicle miles and engineering solutions, transportation grew to be about something more: what urbanists call “placemaking” and what politicians call “economic development.” As David Lee explains elsewhere in these pages, it became clear that rebuilding the Southwest Corridor, for example, “wasn't a transportation project. It was a *community building* project with a transportation component.”

And yet, people do love their cars. The push for new highways continues: a 220-mile road running east-west across Maine; a widened interstate and a new bridge in downtown Louisville. These projects may buck the trend toward density and the rediscovery of authentic

urban cores. But they attract a muscular constituency of their own that the urbanists dismiss at their peril.

Here in Massachusetts, debates about how to spend scarce transportation dollars are riven by geographic and class divides. That's led to dreams deferred for greener, more efficient modes of transportation. The MBTA is critically underfunded and overburdened. South Station is already at capacity. Some 30,000 new housing units are planned within a half-mile of current transit or commuter-rail stations, according to the Urban Land Institute. Where will all those people park?

This region needs a big new conversation aimed at getting people out of their cars. But please, not another blue-ribbon commission. We need to try, or at least debate, audacious ideas such as congestion pricing (it's working in London and Stockholm) or a significant hike in the gasoline tax. And we need some juicy carrots, too: public transit that's convenient, fast, affordable, and reliable. How about giving the Silver Line its own dedicated travel lane? Or deep discounts for off-peak travel on the T?

The highway fights of decades past gave ordinary citizens a voice, and the debate was all the better for it. Today's conversation can include the broadest public participation, facilitated by new media and mapping technologies. Young people are the ones who will be living with the transportation choices we make now. Let them have at it.

“You can't stop progress!” comes the cry. Sometimes, though, progress takes a turn. Over the last four decades, Massachusetts has proven—with the Big Dig, for example—that it's possible to unpave paradise. “Progress” always wants to be in dramatic motion: building, rushing, doing. But one lesson of 1972 is that there can be wisdom in undoing.

Renée Loth  
Editor



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