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Battle for a Neighborhood

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Following a crisis or natural disaster the life of a city may be suddenly changed. As the ordinary becomes, for a time, extraordinary, the usually slow, incremental process by which urban form takes shape may be disrupted, and brief, unusual opportunities arise.

As emergency funds open the possibility to implement long-dormant dreams, however, critical questions emerge. Can this fleeting moment be sustained long enough to create real change? Who will decide its character? And will the vision be compelling enough to create the political coalition needed to implement it?

The battle to remove the Central Freeway in San Francisco following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake serves as an intriguing example of such a process of civic reinvention. It also provides an example of how a powerful design idea can help grassroots activism triumph over expediency.

Today, the consequences of the Central Freeway struggle continue to reverberate well beyond roadway design, to include issues of housing affordability, architectural design, and the nature of public space in the city.

San Francisco's Freeways

Like so many American metropolises, the San Francisco Bay Area was transformed in the 1950s and 60s by a wave of freeway building designed to speed cars through and past existing urban neighborhoods and out to the burgeoning suburbs. The Bay Area's first master plan for such a high-speed auto infrastructure was developed in 1948 by the California Department

Above: Axonometric view the potential build-out of the land formerly occupied by the Central Freeway. Drawing by Solomon E.T.C.

Opposite: The level of conflict in the struggle to replace the Central Freeway became clear in this piece of pro-freeway campaign literature.

of Highways. After several iterations, it came to include a web of elevated expressways that would surround and crisscross the City of San Francisco linking the Oakland Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge and the Peninsula to the south.

Strikingly, within the city, the plan called for a double-decked highway to run along the entire length of the downtown waterfront (known as the Embarcadero), crossing Market Street directly in front of the Ferry Building, its preautomotive gateway. Another such double-decked segment, which would become known as the Central Freeway, was planned to connect Highway 101 northward to the Civic Center, slicing through the city's South of Market, Hayes Valley, and Western Addition districts. From there, additional segments were planned to continue north to the Marina district and west through the Golden Gate Park Panhandle to a cloverleaf interchange with another major north-south route. Massive demolition through dense central neighborhoods would be required to realize the plan.

When construction of this roadway system began in the 1950s, many San Franciscans were appalled by the results. Clearly, the city they prized for its beauty would be unrecognizable if the plans were fully implemented. When protests greeted the opening of the first segment of the Embarcadero/Golden Gate Freeway in 1959, the city's governing Board of Supervisors voted to halt most remaining projects. And in the years that followed, led by activists like the late Sue Bierman in Haight Ashbury, many neighborhoods organized to oppose further attempts by the California Department of Highways to build extensions to existing freeway segments. In a final blow to the master

plan, the supervisors voted 6 to 5 in 1966 to stop an extension of the Central Freeway into Golden Gate Park.

These battles spared much of the city from freeway blight and created a new appreciation for its architectural heritage. But, in practical terms, they left fragments of a larger system, which dumped concentrated volumes of high-speed traffic onto city streets.

One Moment of Change

The epicenter of the 1989 earthquake lay deep beneath the Santa Cruz Mountains, but its destructive force was felt throughout the Bay Area, many miles to the north. The quake, the region's most severe since 1906, caused billions of dollars of damage, and hit its freeway infrastructure particularly hard. It collapsed the double-decked Cypress Structure in Oakland, killing 42 people, damaged the Oakland Bay Bridge, and forced closure of two significant freeways in San Francisco, the Embarcadero and the Central.

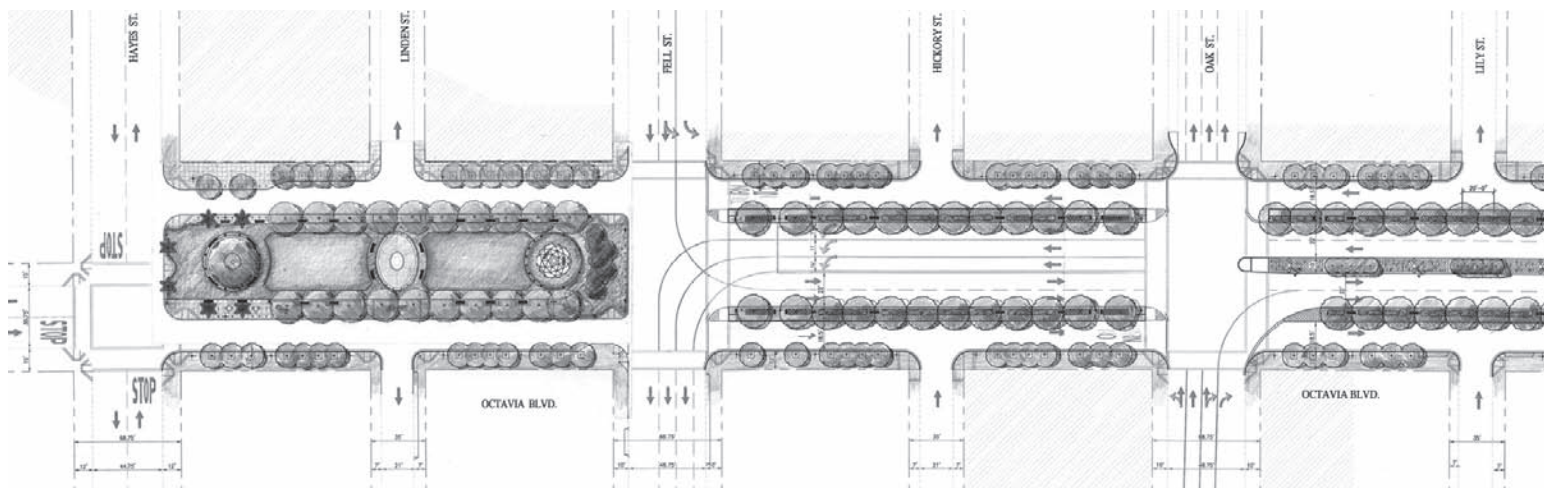
With many of San Francisco's other freeways in need of expensive retrofit and repair, the quake also rekindled hope that these vestiges of an ill-conceived transportation plan might finally be torn down. The challenge, however, was to develop a replacement plan that could recapture the space occupied by the Embarcadero and the Central Freeways to the benefit of the entire city, while offering viable transportation alternatives to those who had grown dependent upon them.

In the case of the Embarcadero Freeway the argument for demolition was relatively easy to make because engineering studies could offer no hope for an economical retrofit. Had the quake lasted a few seconds longer, seismologists even suggested it would have "pancaked" like its twin,



the Cypress Structure in Oakland. Because planners had explored removing the elevated structure at the waterfront for years, a great deal of support also existed for a ground-level boulevard that might integrate a light-rail line and allow reconnection of the downtown to its waterfront.

Of course, the final decision to tear down the Embarcadero Freeway was not without controversy. Many felt it was vital to the economic well-being of neighborhoods north of downtown, including Chinatown. Others, however, heralded the benefits of reclaiming the water's edge, and within five years they had prevailed. Today it is almost impossible to imagine the city without its redesigned Embarcadero.



By comparison, the effort to remove the damaged sections of the Central Freeway would prove far more difficult. Several factors contributed: the Central Freeway linked to arterial roadways that served large western and northern neighborhoods; the lower-income, and largely minority neighborhoods that surrounded the freeway did not have nearly as powerful a constituency as the downtown waterfront; and design alternatives had not previously been explored. Clearly, time would be needed to develop a workable solution that could address the transportation issues and repair the scar left in the fabric of the city if the freeway was removed.

Despite the importance of the situation, many of the city's elected officials proved unwilling to step forward to address it. Politically, the issue represented a no-win situation. At the time, San Francisco elected members of its Board of Supervisors at-large, rather than by district. Taking a strong position one way or the other on the Central Freeway issue would mean alienating a large block of voters. The fight to remove the freeway thus fell largely to neighborhood activists.

The Need for a Plan

The first effort to plan the future of the Central Freeway involved a series of public meetings led by Caltrans, formerly the California Department of Highways. These resulted in chaos, as the agency focused only on schemes to retrofit, widen, and rebuild all or portions of the roadway. Many residents of the surrounding Western Addition and Hayes Valley neighborhoods strongly opposed these concepts. But they splintered over an ever-expanding array of alternatives, and without direction from Caltrans, the process stalled while neighbors debated how much of the freeway should be demolished, how traffic should cross Market Street (via tunnel, recessed roadway, overpass or surface street), and how the project would be funded if a freeway were not part of the design.

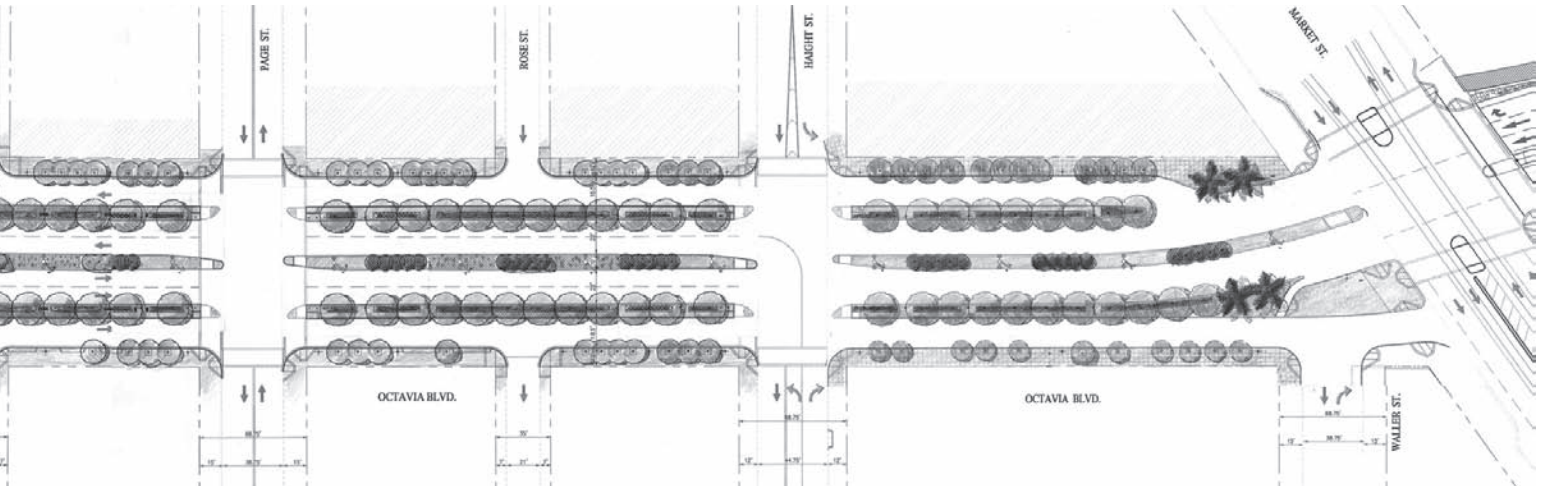
The apparent disarray and delay prompted activists in neighborhoods farther west, frustrated by disrupted traffic flow, to author a city ballot measure directing Caltrans to cease studying alternatives and rebuild the damaged freeway immediately. The measure was approved by voters in November of 1997.

Shocked by the vote, freeway foes

realized they needed to unite behind a compelling alternative. The solution was a design by Alan Jacobs and Elizabeth MacDonald for a European-style boulevard that could balance citywide travel needs with the needs of surrounding neighborhoods. The pair envisioned terminating the single-decked portion of the freeway at Market Street, from where a new Octavia Boulevard would extend four blocks north, ending at a new public "green" which would buffer the active retail area on Hayes Street from through-traffic.

Jacobs and MacDonald's boulevard design allowed higher-speed traffic to be accommodated in four center lanes, which would feed into the east-west arterial streets running through the area. Local, slower-moving traffic and bicycles would be accommodated on secondary neighborhood lanes with curbside parking. The two systems would be separated by landscaped medians that would provide pathways for pedestrians. The sidewalks in the plan were designed to be wide, protected from traffic, and they included various seating and landscaping amenities.

In general terms, the boulevard scheme was intended to disperse and diffuse the freeway traffic into the city



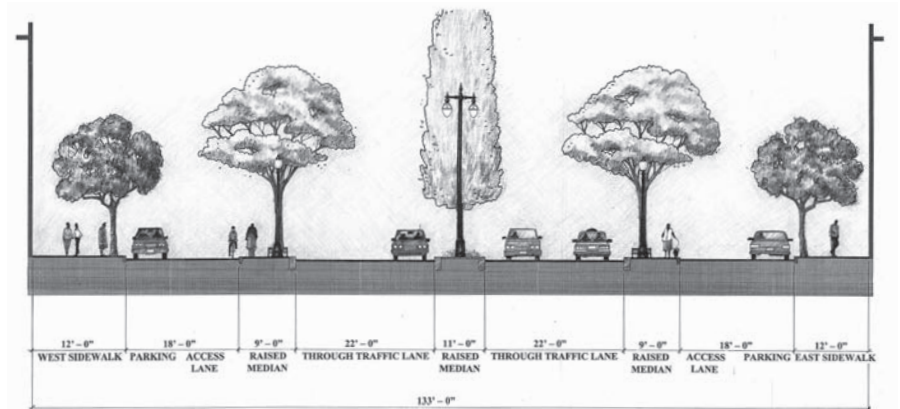
grid, while reclaiming a meaningful pedestrian realm. As Jacobs and MacDonald explained, it offered something for everyone, but no one interest group got everything.

More Propositions, Pro and Con

With this plan in hand, activists from the Hayes Valley neighborhood, backed by a citywide coalition, mounted a campaign to repeal the initiative to rebuild the freeway. They collected enough signatures to place a new measure, Proposition E, before voters, and raised enough money to finance a support campaign.

In response to these efforts, freeway supporters fought back. Dismissing the boulevard idea as a pipe dream, they attempted to discredit its backers by asking “What are they smoking?” Prop E supporters countered that “A 1950’s mistake can’t solve a 21st century problem.” And in November 1998, buoyed by endorsements from several members of the Board of Supervisors and one of the city’s main newspapers, the boulevard proposition passed by a comfortable margin.

The victory, however, was short lived. Just as boulevard proponents turned to an implementation strategy, word came that freeway advocates



had collected enough signatures to qualify yet another initiative. The new Proposition J called not only for repeal of the boulevard plan and the rebuilding of the freeway, but repeal of a 1992 Board of Supervisor’s ban on extending the freeway northward. The measure also required that any further changes would need approval by a two-thirds majority of the voters.

Boulevard proponents were deeply discouraged by the prospect of fighting another anti-freeway campaign. The futility of trying to conduct urban design via the ballot box was becoming clear, as only the most superficial aspects of the issue had ever reached voters through the media. A deficit remained from the previous Prop E

campaign, and there also was strong voter fatigue over the whole issue. However, boulevard proponents and Hayes Valley neighborhood activists led by Robin Levitt and the late Patricia Walkup rallied supporters by expanding the debate beyond the roadway issue.

Above: Octavia Boulevard. Drawing courtesy of the San Francisco Department of Public Works. Market is the diagonal cross-street at the right. Crossing Market (traveling left to right), traffic ascends to the remaining section of the freeway, which is not double decked, and which connects to I-80 east to the Bay Bridge and US 101 south to San Francisco Airport.

Below: Cross-section drawing of Octavia Boulevard. Drawing courtesy of the San Francisco Department of Public Works.



With the help of several city supervisors, they put a counter Proposition I on the ballot that would reaffirm the boulevard plan and enable portions of the land opened by freeway removal to be sold off for housing. Proceeds from the sale of former freeway right-of-way would be used to fund the design and construction of the boulevard, and any remaining monies would be used for transportation improvements along routes leading to or from it.

After three consecutive years of voting on the Central Freeway issue, San Franciscans finally had both alternatives before them. In the summer of 1999, a “No on J/Yes on I” campaign was launched by boulevard proponents—this time with a broader coalition, and television advertising. While freeway advocates called their proposed boulevard a “horse and buggy

transportation plan,” boulevard supporters claimed it would be “Cheaper, Faster, Better.”

An Expanded Civic Enterprise

The Central Freeway debate was finally settled on election day 1999. Passage of Prop I and defeat of Prop J meant the Jacobs/MacDonald boulevard plan could move forward. The first official step was the transfer of freeway lands north of Market Street from the state to the city.

During the first morning rush hour after the freeway was closed news helicopters circled overhead expecting a traffic Armageddon that never materialized. Then, before work officially began, Hayes Valley residents hosted a demolition party under the Market Street overpass. Politicians were given the chance to whack at the freeway

columns with a golden sledge hammer, and all now claimed to have been boulevard supporters from the beginning.

A further significant shift in public attitudes had also taken place. The last round of campaigning had forced grassroots advocates to expand their aspirations and confront a deeper set of questions. What kind of neighborhood would emerge if the freeway came down? What aspects of the surrounding area should be reinforced if the street grid were knitted back together? And at neighborhood meetings, which took place in tandem with the campaign, the idea had taken root that a better city could be envisioned collectively through planning, as local residents began to tackle such complex issues as optimal housing densities, the impact of parking, and the importance of pedestrian friendly-streets.

Such increased public awareness paid off as the boulevard project grew into a major urban-infill project. With the freeway gone, areas formerly adjacent to it needed to be rezoned, and major public and private investments were needed on former freeway lands. The San Francisco Planning Department responded by launching a master planning initiative for the entire Market/Octavia area.

After years of politics, residents were primed to engage in a real community process to address inter-related issues of neighborhood livability, housing affordability, density, architectural design, traffic planning, transit, and parking. The plan that emerged included reductions to parking requirements and changes in the way housing densities were calculated to encourage design flexibility and active ground-floor uses. It is unlikely the community would have supported these ideas without the experience and perspective gained during the boulevard fight.

Today, the sense that community advocacy can be leveraged to achieve good neighborhood design and planning has continued to evolve in new directions. Hayes Valley activist Robin Levitt convinced the Mayor's Office of Economic Development, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, and several civic organizations to sponsor a competition to address the potential of parcels bordering the boulevard for new housing. Aimed at reclaiming the neighborhood through quality design and architectural innovation, the San Francisco Prize 2005 elicited more than 160 entries and introduced a host of challenging ideas.

In addition, the popular new green, now named for Patricia Walkup, has become the focus of an ongoing temporary art program. A temple installa-



tion by David Best was wildly popular, and additional projects are in the pipeline. Neighborhood efforts are also underway to redesign some of the alleyways intersecting the boulevard after the Dutch *woonerf* (which creates semipublic outdoor living spaces by blurring the boundaries between street and sidewalk).

A Moment to Savor

When Mayor Gavin Newsom cut the ribbon to open Octavia Boulevard on September 9, 2005, the presence of the Central Freeway in the area seemed a distant memory. The dark overpass at Market Street was gone; the tree-lined intersection at Octavia was filled with sunlight and people; and the new vistas south to Bernal Heights and north to St. Mary's Cathedral were startling.

But nagging questions remained.

Could it really have taken sixteen years to build four blocks of boulevard? Could more have been done to extend it south of Market Street? Would the surrounding neighborhood find ways to temper new pressures of gentrification?

Still, it was a moment to savor. The Loma Prieta earthquake had opened a window for San Franciscans to reassess past planning decisions and consider alternatives. And in Hayes Valley ordinary citizens had been inspired to create historic change by taking charge of the planning process.

Opposite: Octavia Boulevard. Photo by author.
Above: Historical aerial view of Central Freeway. Photo courtesy the San Francisco Department of Public Works.