



The Freeway Journey

It has taken us to our daily destinations. It has given us the freedom to efficiently go where we want, when we want. It has empowered the transformation of the way we live. It has redefined the American city. The freeway journey has been an amazing trip for America, and an especially remarkable experience for Houston.

Few could have imagined the forces that the freeway would unleash on urban America. Suburbanization. Edge cities. Decentralization. In Houston, these forces have been amplified and accentuated due to the prominence of the freeway. Frontage roads have been most influential in defining the extraordinary role of freeways in Houston. Freeways have also benefited from their high standing in Houston's vision of the future. Freeways have empowered Houston to achieve its goals of growth, prosperity, opportunity, and a seemingly unlimited future. In the post-World War II era, the Houston spirit was built on a foundation of freeways.

The freeway is poised to take us into the future. At this point in the freeway journey, we can pause to reflect. What have been the landmarks on our freeway journey? What have we learned from our 55 years on the freeways? Can a freeway future in 2003 still hold the same promise that it did in 1948?

(Opposite page) **A lifetime of journeys, and the journey of our lifetimes:** Vehicles take a (slow) freeway journey at the Beltway 8-Katy Freeway interchange. While we take journeys on the freeways every day, in a larger sense the freeway has defined the way we live and empowered a lifestyle that has been possible for only the last 40 years. (Photo: James Lyle, TTI, June 2001)

Landmarks on the Journey

As we have seen, freeways have been remarkably influential in nearly every aspect of the development of modern Houston. The freeway has played a large role in nearly all American cities, but in Houston the scope and pervasive presence of freeway-inspired development has elevated the freeway to a seemingly unequalled level of importance. On our freeway journey we have seen the products of the influence of the freeway—the freeway landmarks. Houston’s freeway landmarks are among the biggest, most impressive, and most influential in the United States. The landmarks define Houston, but they also exemplify the powerful role of the freeway in shaping the modern American city.

We have seen how freeways have shaped suburbia. Sharpstown was one of the largest suburban residential developments in the United States when it was launched in 1955, and one of the first to be designed around a freeway. Starting with Clear Lake City near the Gulf Freeway in 1962, a wave of large, master-planned suburban communities took root near freeways. The Woodlands, launched in 1974 along the North Freeway, became a model for suburban design.

We have seen how freeways have propelled Houston to the forefront of commercial development. Superb freeway access to downtown spurred a 10-year construction binge that transformed the skyline into one of the more impressive in the United States. One of the nation’s most impressive instances of the “edge city” rose along the West Loop, with its Galleria shopping center that served as a model for high-end, mixed-use developments in other cities. Other freeway-based centers of commerce, such as the Katy Freeway Energy Corridor, took root along the loops and radial freeways. The influence of the freeway even led the displacement of an entire neighborhood for the Greenway Plaza development on the Southwest Freeway.

We have seen how freeways have been woven into the fabric of the city, often seamlessly, but sometimes inspiring strong emotion and disagreement. The abrupt and dramatic end of the La Porte Freeway serves as a reminder of the opposition that successfully fought the freeway. The expansive South Freeway had the final word in a neighborhood where the transformation of the inner city first began.

We have seen how the freeways themselves are landmarks. One particular characteristic of Houston’s freeways, the freeway frontage road, has been a huge factor in defining Houston’s distinct freeway-based urban development pattern. The frontage road urban development pattern exists to a large scale only in Texas, and it reaches its greatest extent in Houston. The frontage road has influenced many distinguishing characteristics of Houston’s freeways, including wide corridors, five-level freeway-to-freeway interchanges, and continuous high mast illumination. Houston’s freeway-based transitway system has been a pioneer in the cost-effective delivery of mass transit services and has served as a model for other cities.

Lessons Learned on the Journey

There is a much-used political expression that “all politics are local.” That expression can be extended to freeways, because if there’s one lesson to be learned about freeways, it’s that all freeways are local. Local efforts were crucial to the formulation of the original freeway plan, but as time passed, the role of narrowly focused subregions has become more important. In an era of diminished resources, freeway construction has increasingly shifted to constituencies that have political influence, make financial contributions to the project cost, and show near-unanimous support for the project. In Houston there have been many interests who really want freeways, helping propel Houston’s freeway system to what it is today.

We have seen that construction of freeways has never been easy—it has been a challenge every step of the way. In the 1950s the need to raise local money to pay for the local share of freeway costs required ongoing and extensive efforts by civic organizations. The 1970s brought the deepest crisis freeway construction has ever faced. The 1980s resurrection required strong political leadership and a broad effort of the business community. Even the seemingly halcyon 1960s was an era of constrained resources. In the modern era, freeways face a daunting maze of regulatory complexity. Houston has demonstrated a very strong perseverance in overcoming challenges and has almost always succeeded.

We have seen that strong political leadership is essential for the construction of transportation infrastructure, freeways in particular. The progress of Houston’s freeway system has largely been a reflection of the level of local political leadership. Houston’s freeways have been a top priority for some of the most influential political leaders in the Houston area since the end of World War II. We have seen the tides of freeway leadership rise and fall in Houston, but there has nearly always been a rising tide to fill the void left by a falling tide. The absence of a rising tide of freeway leadership in the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in decline in freeway investment and contributed to the transportation crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Complacency, neglect, or indifference fosters future crises.

We have seen how Houston’s freeways have been very resistant to change in certain respects, but very adaptive and progressive in other ways. The basic loop and radial system design formulated in the early 1950s has been perpetuated even though a more gridlike system design would be more optimal. The regional arterial system that feeds the freeways has been neglected. Frontage roads have continuously gained importance in the functioning of Houston’s transportation system, providing benefits but also introducing new concerns. Houston’s freeways have been adapted to successfully provide mass transit. Freeway engineering has evolved to provide some of the most modern, up-to-date designs in the nation. Safety has always been a top priority of Houston’s freeway builders. The net result of clinging to the old in some ways and ag-

Houston vs. Los Angeles	
Houston	Los Angeles
Freeways defined the form and development patterns of the city	Sprawl and decentralization characterized the region prior to freeways, primarily due to the Pacific Electric Railway
Widespread frontage roads, the most extensive use in the world	No frontage roads
A transportation system almost entirely focused on freeways	Freeway-focused, but to a lesser extent due to better arterial roads and no freeway frontage roads
Among the national leaders in per-capita lane-miles (major cities)	About 58% as many lane-miles as Houston on a per-capita basis
An aggressive plan for freeway growth and modernization	Modest plans for improvements
Continuously striving for improvement, preparing for the future	Resting on its laurels

gressively advancing in other ways has been a concentration of transportation resources into the freeway, providing larger, more impressive freeways.

We have seen that Houston's demand for freeway capacity is nearly insatiable. Houston's strong growth has surely contributed to the steadily increasing demand for freeway and road capacity, but modern lifestyles and commuting patterns increasingly rely on the freeway. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for any other form of transportation to compete with the convenience and flexibility of the private automobile, especially in low-density, sprawling cities like Houston. However, we have seen instances where freeways were built and very few cars followed: the Crosby Freeway and the frontage-road-only Red Bluff Road. The South Freeway has also been slow to attract traffic.

The Journey into the Future

In 1948, the freeway was poised to dramatically transform America and shape a new generation of cities, including Houston. In 2003, the freeway doesn't offer any profound changes for the future, but it will continue to provide benefits that are among the most valuable to all of us: personal mobility, housing opportunity, and economic development. There are always efforts to achieve these goals without freeways, particularly among groups opposed to freeways. But in the urban environment of Houston, nothing can deliver the benefits like the freeway can. Competing options, such as transit and high-density housing, will make gains, but the freeway will continue to reign supreme. Perhaps only a major disruptive event—

such as a very substantial increase in energy costs—can reduce the demand for freeways. Chances are greater that the advance of technology will produce cars with fewer environmental impacts and less energy consumption. And the cars of the future will still need freeways.

In the larger sense, what is the legacy of the freeway city? Is being mentioned in the same breath with Los Angeles a badge of honor, or a stain of embarrassment? That question has been, and will continue to be, one that arouses strong opinions. But perhaps an oft-cited expression can illuminate the underlying issue: "What's worse than a city the size of Los Angeles with a bunch of freeways? A city the size of Los Angeles without a bunch of freeways."

On September 30, 1948, a crowd of Houstonians gathered on a Gulf Freeway overpass to witness the dedication of Houston's first freeway. Houston's freeway journey began. The journey would build what is perhaps the world's most freeway-focused city. A unique blend of ingredients came together—a mix of factors that could exist in only a few places and combined in the most powerful way in Houston. The Texas commitment to frontage roads. A pro-business, pro-growth philosophy. Great leadership. Driven and visionary individuals. A geographic location and urban environment suited for economical freeway construction. A guiding principle of continuous improvement, that bigger is better. A commitment to freeways that hasn't wavered over time. It is a unique blend of ingredients that produced a great freeway system and a fascinating story. It has been, and continues to be, a remarkable journey.